THE READER'S QUEST

Reading and the Constitution of Meaning in Five Novels

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Arts,
University of Cape Town for the Degree of
Master of Arts

October 1984

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I attempt to show how the concept of reading as literary interpretation has been influenced by the insights of the psychoanalyst and theorist Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). Broadly speaking, I call for a revised view of the role of the reader and the act of reading in the light of arguments such as the following: firstly, that the linguistic subject is "split" rather than "autonomous"; secondly, that since language is a representational rather than transparent medium, "truth" can only ever be regarded as partial and irreducibly open to revision; and thirdly, that reading as an interpretive activity arises from the unconscious Desire to resolve the sense of incompleteness which language acquisition produces in the linguistic subject.

Following the lead of various interpreters of Lacan's theory and psychoanalytic procedure, I offer an introductory outline of his thought and its relevance to literary theory and criticism. Then in the four chapters which follow I attempt to demonstrate this relevance through readings of a selection of novels.

In the first chapter, I come to the conclusion that reading should be viewed less as a quest after "the truth" of the text, than a quest to discover what "the truth" must disregard in order to be "the truth." In the second chapter, I conclude that narration is an effect of reading,

that the relationship of the narrator and the reader is therefore supplementary, and that the notion of literary "truth" is established by consensus. In the third chapter I conclude that the attempt to satisfy Desire by an attainment of a "full disclosure" of "truth" or "meaning" must result in a loss of meaning per se. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I attempt to synthesize the conclusions of the earlier chapters in the argument that the reader is potentially both the unveiler of the authorial unconscious and the unwitting performer of the conflict of meaning dramatized in the discourse of narrative.

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A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

I wish to thank Professor John M. Coetzee for his insight and endless patience in supervising this thesis; Shaun Irlam for his interest and encouragement; my parents and sister Angela for their support; and Elizabeth van Ryssen for preparing the final typescript.

I wish also to express my appreciation for the financial assistance provided by the University of Cape Town and the Human Sciences Research Council. The conclusions arrived at in this thesis are not, however, to be regarded as in any way a reflection on the H S R C.

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INTRODUCTION

An important feature of literary studies in recent years has been the growth of interest in the reader. If contemporary theories of literary signification and criticism are numerous and confusing in their frequently incompatible activities, the majority of them seem to agree on the importance of offering some perspective on the activity of reading. In relation to the diversity of these investigations of reading, the perspective I adopt in this thesis manifests a twofold partiality. It is necessarily partial, since the scope of the project compels the investigator to restrict her investigation to a limited field, and voluntarily partial in that it reflects a preference towards a perspective of reading that has developed recently from the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan.

Another feature of recent literary theory and criticism has been the manifestation of interest in interdisciplinary studies which can be seen as a legacy of the intellectual movement loosely describable as "Structuralism". The writings of leading anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, of linguists such as Roman Jakobson, of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and systems historians such as Michel Foucault, have become acknowledged as seminal influences upon literary theory. While French-Freudian psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, has also been widely acclaimed as an influence upon literary studies, his theories have proved a somewhat

less tractable tool for textual analysis than have the theories of, for example, Jacques Derrida. One reason for this is, I believe, the very particular nature of the difficulty with which his writing confronts the reader.

Almost every text which aims to explicate Lacanian theory includes some prefatory or introductory remark upon the peculiar difficulty of the task of reading his work. Since this work has been chosen as the chief theoretical basis on which my investigation of the reader's quest will draw, and since its difficulty will be repeatedly confronted by both the writer and the reader of this thesis, it seems important to give some preliminary consideration to the difficulty of reading Lacan.

One of the most protracted, but useful, comments on this difficulty is offered by Robert Con Davis in his editorial introduction to the recent special issue of Modern Language Notes devoted to "Lacan and Narration."[1] Using the wellknown essay by George Steiner, "On Difficulty,"[2] Davis identifies four types of difficulty in Lacan's discourse: contingent, modal, tactical and ontological. He argues:

> Contingent difficulties, in brief, are those problems we might have with the obscurity of Lacan's text, possibly psychoanalytical, linguistic, and philosophical terms that we, as Steiner says, "need to look up."[3]

[1] Robert Con Davis, "Introduction: Lacan and Narration," Modern Language Notes, 98, No 5 (Dec. 1983) pp. 855-858.

[2] George Steiner, "On Difficulty," in On Difficulty and Other Essays (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[3] Davis, "Introduction," p. 855.

As this remark suggests, the character of Lacan's work is interdisciplinary and he draws freely from sources as various as Hegel, Heidegger, Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, to name only his most obvious influences. In itself, this problem need not prove insurmountable; however, in Lacan's case it is compounded by the exclusivity of the context in which his publications evolve. Most of his writings are transcripts either of lectures originally presented to colleagues or senior students at various academic congresses and conferences, or of his weekly or bi-weekly Seminar delivered at the Ecole normale supérieure and described by Stuart Schneiderman as "one of the longest running Parisian fads in memory ... a center of Parisian intellectual activity."[4] Speaking then, to initiated audiences whom he expected to recognize his allusions and references, Lacan made little, if any, deference to the newcomer. Furthermore, as Anthony Wilden, one of Lacan's best known and most respected explicators points out, Lacan rarely draws attention to a revision or contradictory innovation in his opinions. Instead, his theories are presented en bloc in each seminar and it is left to his followers to detect any such changes, even to recontextualize previously familiar terminology that is given an unpredictable application.[5] I do not wish at this point, to digress to a

[4] Stuart Schneiderman, The Death of an Intellectual Hero (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983) P. 28.

[5] Anthony Wilden in J. Lacan, Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis, Trans., Notes and Commentary by Anthony Wilden (Balti-

consideration of the professional validity of this approach. Suffice it to say that Lacan has been criticized on more than one occasion for his "intransigent" thinking and his "like it or lump it" attitude to his reader.[6] The fact remains that the uninitiated reader, most particularly the Anglo-American reader who is not accustomed to the comparatively homogeneous intellectual climate of Lacan's Paris, is liable to find the contingent difficulties of his texts overwhelming. Even if he overcomes this initial difficulty, another, modal difficulty, is liable to arise from the "Seminar" context of the Lacanian text. Davis describes this as follows:

> ... modal difficulty, rather than being an obscurity in the text, is a problem of receptivity for the reader in regard to a text's mode of presentation. Lacan's major publications, mostly transcripts of lectures, are addressed to us as students who are supposedly in diligent pursuit of this Master's teachings (imagine the audacity of entitling one's own book simply Ecrits!). This magisterial mode can pose problems of tone and can generate resistance enough to become a great obstacle in reading.[7]

The reader who plunges himself into the spirit of the Parisian Seminar, studying Lacan's sources, pursuing his teachings

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more and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968 pbk 1981) p. 182. (This text is the revised version of The Language of the Self, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1968).

[6] For example see Anthony Wilden's remarks in "The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real," in System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange (London and New York: Tavistock, 1972 rpt 1980) pp. 1 and 6.

[7] Davis, "Introduction," p. 855-856.

diligently, may nevertheless encounter tactical difficulty which is described by Davis as,

> ... created by Lacan's strategies for communicating efficiently and powerfully. In his discourse Lacan may explain a point about the "gaze" quite fully and then refuse to expound on a related concept, or suddenly break off all explanation. This practice, like his erratically short therapy sessions, is intended to prompt his listeners to a deep and direct engagement with psychoanalysis, to bring them face-to-face with "real" (impossibly continuous) discourse.[8]

It seems that this difficulty can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand it can be seen as the ideological challenge described by Juliet Mitchell:

> ... Lacan's style is a challenge to easy comprehension, to the popularisation and secularisation of psychoanalysis as it has occurred most notably in North America. Psychoanalysis should aim to show us that we do not know those things we think we do; it therefore cannot assault our popular conceptions by using the very idiom it is intended to confront; a challenge to ideology cannot rest on a linguistic appeal to that same ideology.[9]

On the other hand, and less obviously, it can be seen as itself a re-enactment, a dramatization, of the very ambiguity or divisiveness of meaning which calls for the interpretation of Freud's work that Lacan's theories undertake. In this respect, the tactical difficulty of Lacan's discourse is closely related to the fourth and perhaps most fascinating of the difficulties: the ontological difficulty. I return to Davis' argument:

[8] Davis, "Introduction," p. 856.

[9] Juliet Mitchell, Introd., Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne, eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (London: Macmillan Press, 1982) p. 4.

> The greatest difficulty in reading Lacan, and the far more interesting one to contemplate is ontological, the "difficulty," as Steiner writes, that breaks "the contract of ultimate or preponderant intelligibility between poet and reader, between text and meaning."[13] "Difficulties of this category," he continues, "cannot be looked up" because "... they confront us with blank questions about the nature of human speech [and] about the status of significance."[14] In other words, an ontological difficulty arises — that is, the contract may break between writer and reader, text and meaning — when a text posits (in Thomas Kuhn's terminology) a whole new paradigm of understanding entailing a new grasp of phenomena, their relations, and the horizon of possibility that moves up behind them. This "difficulty," though not inherently insurmountable, can be an absolute obstacle to understanding.[10]

The particular paradigm of understanding which Lacan presents is, as Davis corroborates, characterized by the "split" that is the implication of linguistic representation, and that constitutes a division in the linguistic subject and in the discourse which he articulates. It is this revision of the status of the linguistic subject and the implication which it holds for the status of the reader and his activity of reading that this thesis attempts to explore. The first task would therefore necessarily seem to be to offer an introductory account of the genesis of the Lacanian "split".

Before I undertake this task, may I say that, in the light of the "difficulties" of reading Lacan's work described above, I am aware that my own undertaking to "introduce" or "explicate" even the fundamental points of his theory, may appear not only ambitious, but even an impertinence.

[10] Davis, "Introduction," p. 856. Footnotes number 13 and 14 in Davis's text refer to Steiner, "On Difficulty," p. 40 and 41 respectively.

Such an appearance may be modified by the following acknowledgements: firstly, while an introduction of the kind which I shall presently undertake can attempt to lessen some of the difficulties described above – while it may, for example, attempt to explicate terminology that is foreign to traditional literary studies, or offer explications and systematic accounts where Lacan's discourse is most elliptical and unsystematic – it must constantly remind itself that such actions are fundamentally non-Lacanian. If by eliminating the ambiguities in Lacan's text, this introduction is able to give the impression that we can "know what he means," it must simultaneously acknowledge that that very impression of "knowledge" depends on a loss of the meaning that has been eliminated. As Shoshana Felman argues,

> ... it is precisely the imposition of a limit beyond which vision is prohibited which dispels the "split of attention" and at the same time the split of meaning, and which hence makes possible the illusion of total mastery over meaning as a whole, as an unimpaired totality.[11]

As we shall see, "total mastery" is precisely the state of being which Jacques Lacan – ironically so often acclaimed "a Master" – most adamantly repudiates.

The second acknowledgement I must make is that I have been able to give close attention to only the first of Lacan's major publications, known in its English translation

[11] Shoshana Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," Yale French Studies 55/56 (1977) p. 167.

as Ecrits: A Selection,[12] and containing transcripts of seminars given between approximately 1949 and 1960. Since Lacan continued to teach virtually until his death on September 9, 1981,[13] this thesis excludes many developments in his thinking subsequent to Ecrits. Although I have drawn peripherally on many of his later publications, particularly where they have been rendered accessible by more experienced interpreters, I have been forced to suspend closer readings of these texts as beyond the scope of what is already a lengthy project.

Finally, it will be evident in the following introduction that I draw heavily on the work of Lacan's various interpreters and commentators. This seems to me the most satisfactory method of both ensuring the accuracy of my own reading of his texts, and at the same time demonstrating the diversity of thought to which his theories have already given rise.

[12] Jacques Lacan, Ecrits: A Selection, trans. A. Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977). All subsequent references to this text will be included in brackets in the main body of the thesis using the abbreviation Ecrits followed by the relevant page number.

[13] See Stuart Schneiderman's account of the closing stages of Lacan's career in The Death of an Intellectual Hero, pp. 17-25.

LACANALYSIS: THE PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY AND PROCEDURE OF JACQUES LACAN

> ... the originality of Jacques Lacan lies in his radical understanding of the radicality of Freud's discovery, and in his eagerness to carry the consequences of this discovery to their logical limits. In so doing, Lacan assesses and thinks out — as no one has done before him — not just the significance of psychoanalysis but, specifically, the significance of the difference that it makes, of the difference it has introduced into Western culture.
>
> — Shoshana Felman

The central project of Lacan's theory has become popularly identified by the slogan which he himself coined, the "return to Freud" (Ecrits p. 114). On the face of it, the particular task which he set himself was to reread Freud's work in such a way as to prove that in spite of certain contradictions and ambiguities which had invited alterations and distortions by subsequent writers, this work could be seen as a cohesive theory for psychoanalysis. In Lacan's opinion, one of the fundamental hindrances to Freud's research which a retrospective assessment could establish, was the unavailability to him of the insights of modern linguistics (see for example, Lacan's comments in Ecrits, pp. 259 and 284), for the groundwork of that discipline was only being mapped by Ferdinand de Saussure and others at the time that Freud was writing his Interpretation of Dreams — a treatise which seems to call particularly for the support of linguistics, as will be demonstrated in the course of this chapter.[14]

[14] The first German edition of Die Traumdeutung was published

If from this initial description Lacan's project appears a comparatively simple exercise, the warning must be sounded that in fact the implications of his "return to Freud" are nothing short of revolutionary. Shoshana Felman makes this point as follows:

> Lacan's well-known inaugural call for the "return to Freud" is in fact itself an operation — and a notion — far more complex, far more original than the simple gesture which it customarily is understood to be: it is not simply a historical return to the authentic origin of a doctrine, nor even a return to Freud's original text as opposed, on the one hand, to its dogmatic, oversimplified interpretations and, on the other hand, to its distortingly inaccurate translations. It is a return to Freud untranslated as a symptom of the essential untranslatability of his subject matter. Freud himself, indeed, has often compared the unconscious to a foreign language and has literally defined repression as a constitutive "failure of translation." It is thus no coincidence that Lacan's return to Freud is dramatized as a literal, concrete return to a foreign language, to something which defies, resists translation: it is a return whose function, paradoxically, is not so much to render Freud familiar as to renew contact with his strangeness: a return to a Freud constitutively foreign — even to himself; a return to Freud's struggle with the radical impossibility of translation; a return to the unconscious — both in Freud's text and of Freud's text — not as a domesticated, reassuring answer, but as an irreducibly uncanny question.[15]

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in 1900. Saussure, as Professor at the University of Geneva, gave his three courses in general linguistics between 1907 and 1911. These were published after his death (1913) when his students and colleagues constructed the text of Cours de Linguistique Générale out of various sets of lecture notes. These, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, were published in Geneva in 1915. For further information see Jonathan Culler, Saussure, (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1976).

[15] Shoshana Felman, "The Originality of Jacques Lacan," Poetics Today, 2, 1b (Winter 1980/81) p. 46.

It is to this notion of the unconscious as an "irreducibly uncanny question" that this discussion of Lacan in its turn returns.

The first task will be to establish and explain the most fundamental concepts and terminology used by Lacan, his theory of the genesis of the "split" subject, and the necessary relation between meaning and sexuality which he recognizes in Freud's work. Thereafter an account will be offered of his application of Saussurean linguistics to Freud's investigation of the unconscious. Finally, drawing on the material already delineated, an investigation will be made of the basic principles of the Lacanian psychoanalytic procedure with an indication, where relevant, of the implications of these principles for the activity of reading.

SECTION I: SPLIT-SUBJECTIVITY: THE BIRTH OF SELF AND OTHER IN LACANIAN THEORY

In his early work, prior to 1953, Lacan, like Freud, manifested a certain preoccupation with the genetic features of psychoanalysis, with the various stages and processes of infantile development involved in the formation of the psyche.[16] This apparent attention to "chronological" development suggests a useful model on which an introducer of Lacan's theories might structure her introduction. Since

[16] For an elaboration of this point see Wilden in Lacan, Speech and Language, p. 162. See also Fredric Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan," Yale French Studies, 55/56 (1977) p. 350.

the two most significant stages of development involved in the formation of the psyche appear to be the "Mirror Stage" or stade du miroir, and the "Oedipal Stage," it is with the former that this introduction will begin. These two stages also provide a convenient opportunity for outlining the three "orders" which Lacan introduced into psychoanalytic terminology in 1953: the orders of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. If these orders are identified alongside those stages of infantile development when the particular features of each manifest themselves most clearly, a compromise seems possible between an inevitably false characterization of the orders as "separate" and an indication of their ultimate inseparability.

The Mirror Stage and the Illusion of Self-Presence

The most comprehensive description of the Mirror Stage is provided in Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" (Ecrits pp. 1-7), which was the revision of an earlier paper and was presented before the sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis in 1949.[17] In this essay, the Mirror Stage is described as an "event" which "... can take place ... from the age of six months ... up to the age of eighteen months" (Ecrits pp. 1-2).

[17] Although this essay is apparently a revision of an earlier paper, "The Looking Glass Phase", which was presented in 1936, and supposedly published both in 1937 and as the first entry ("The Mirror Stage") in the French version of Ecrits, Jane Gallop makes the interesting point that this "earlier version," to which

In his later works, when Lacan becomes absorbed in his development of the logic of signification, the Mirror Stage assumes the status of a structural paradigm and its function lies in demonstrating the child's earliest relation to objects.[18]

The order congruous with the Mirror Stage is the Imaginary Order which could be described as a kind of preverbal register composed specifically of spatial and visual configurations which are not yet perceived as organised around the subject's body, nor even differentiated by him as different from himself. While "difference", as will be demonstrated shortly, is the organising principle of the Symbolic Order, identification, or the urge to find similarity and resemblance is the strategy associated with the Imaginary.

Since it would seem that for Lacan, the newborn baby exists as a totally solipsistic consciousness, "an 'absolute subject' in a totally intransitive relationship to the world he cannot yet distinguish from himself,"[19] the Mirror Stage can be viewed as the paradigm which designates the first awareness of difference between absolute solipsism and the perceptions of "self-as-difference". However, this does not yet amount to an awareness of self objectified

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Alan Sheridan refers in the Bibliographical Note of Ecrits: A Selection, does not in fact exist. For an account of this "lost origin" see Jane Gallop, "Lacan's 'Mirror Stage': Where to begin," Substance, 37/38, (1983) p. 119.

[18] This development in Lacan's theoretical perspective is identified by Wilden in Lacan, Speech and Language, p. 162.

[19] Wilden in Lacan, Speech and Language, p. 163.

in relationship to the other, but the primordial discovery of an image or form which the child had previously lacked, and which the paradigm of mirror recognition seems best suited to illustrate:

> This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infans stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. (Ecrits p. 2).

As this passage suggests, one of the most significant effects of the Mirror Stage is that the subject experiences through it the birth of the illusion of his wholeness, an illusion which significantly, is interpreted by Lacan as inspiring "jubilation." By identifying in the mirror's image attributes which he sees as his own, the child internalizes for himself an Imaginary construct, an "Ideal I" or moi which is described by Lacan as situating "the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone ..." (Ecrits p. 2). He continues,

> This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development (Ecrits p. 4).[20]

As this description indicates, it is in the symmetrical dual structure of the mirror stage that the illusion is established that the self can reflect totally upon itself – the illusion that there can be a perfect symmetry between the "self-who-thinks" and the "self-thought-about" that "subsumes all difference within a delusion of a totalizable, unified and homogenous individual identity."[21] It is this illusion of self-symmetry – an illusion which will haunt the subject in some degree throughout his life – that is, in Lacan's view, disrupted or dislocated by the "splitting" which occurs in the Oedipal Stage.

What the Mirror Stage, as opposed to the Oedipal Stage, serves to emphasize then, is that the moi or ego as a fictional "ideal image" constructed from a succession of imaginary identifications, is not to be confused with the concept of "subject" in Lacanian theory. The following comment by Malcolm Bowie may serve to elucidate this point:

> The ego as a tension-point within Freud's Id-Ego-Superego topography is respected by Lacan as a necessary component of a properly dialectical model of the human subject. But the ego envisaged as an end in itself, as a threatened residence of selfhood needing continually to be refortified against hostile incursions from the id and the superego, is treated with scorn: this stabilized and

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[20] This implication of the Mirror Stage as the projection of the individual into history is particularly interestingly explicated by Jane Gallop who demonstrates the double status of the Mirror Stage as both "origin" of the self, yet paradoxically, also as "turning point" in a chronology – the natural maturation process – that is already in progress. See Jane Gallop, "Lacan's 'Mirror Stage': Where to Begin," pp. 121-122.

[21] Felman, "The Originality of Jacques Lacan," p. 51.

> tranquillized ego plays dumbly into the hands of the 'soul managers' and the social engineers. Lacan's accounts of the psychical apparatus at work have at their centre the notion not of ego but of subject.[22]

I shall return to a more comprehensive discussion of subjectivity in Lacan's theory shortly.

Returning once again to the concept of the Mirror Stage as a phase of development in the child's psyche, it is clear that the child's relationship to his mother is of particular significance during this period. Although he is totally dependent on his mother for his needs, the child cannot as yet distinguish her as "other" than himself, with the needs and desires of an other. In Lacanian terms his identification with her is envisaged as representing a merging of self and other. Ideally, this relationship reaches the point where the child, not content merely to be cared for by the mother, wishes to be her all-absorbing occupation. It is this condition which is superseded by the "Oedipal Stage."

The Oedipal Stage[23]

The Oedipal myth in Freud's work serves as an illustration and validation of his theory of the individual's sexual and psychic evolution. When Lacan incorporated

[22] Malcolm Bowie, "Jacques Lacan," in Structuralism and Since, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) p. 131.

[23] Since a systematic description of his view of the Oedipal Stage is nowhere to be found in his writings, what is presented here as Lacan's view is a conflation of conclusions drawn from both his own texts and from those of his commentators.

into this reading the additional possibility that the myth might be used to illustrate the implications of the subject's language acquisition, he was effectively demonstrating the equivalence between rhetoric and Freud's view of sexuality. The following account of the Oedipal Stage and its implications will include an attempt to explicate this equivalence.

Broadly speaking, from a Lacanian perspective, the Oedipal process is instigated when the father, standing in the role of Symbolic Father or representative of the Law, the primal Other – I shall return to an explication of the plurisignificant term "the Other" shortly – intervenes in the dual relationship between the child and the mother, denying the child his wish to be the complement of the mother. In the terms of the Oedipal myth, this intervention is expressed in the form of a double veto which could be articulated as:

> to the child: "Thou shalt not sleep with thy mother."
> to the mother: "Thou shalt not re-appropriate thy product."
> [24]

The veto, if accepted by the child[25] can, for clarity's sake, be seen to have three primary consequences: firstly,

[24] Anika Lemaire, Jacques Lacan, trans. David Macey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977 pbk 1981) p. 82.

[25] Since the focus of this investigation is not intended to be psychoanalytical, the non-acceptance of the Oedipal veto and the psychosis which this may generate is not relevant and can therefore be passed over, although it may entail one of Lacan's most significant contributions to contemporary psychoanalytical thinking. For the purposes of this discussion, only the ideal case of the child who accepts the Oedipal veto will be considered.

the subject will acquire access to, and a place within, the order of the Symbolic; secondly, as a result of this acquisition, he will suffer the Splitting or Spaltung which such membership to the Symbolic Order entails; thirdly, he will become the victim of unconscious Desire. Let us consider each of these consequences in turn.

a. Membership to the Symbolic Order

Capitalized to distinguish it from any conventional use of the term, "the Symbolic" refers to that Order, that network of cultural and linguistic codes, conventions and laws into which the infant is born and to which he is unavoidably initiated in the process of language acquisition. The Symbolic Father who is usually, but not invariably, the child's natural father, stands as representative of Symbolic Law, while the mother, in so far as she reinforces the Symbolic Law, may also play the role of Symbolic Parent.

While the Imaginary Order referred to in the description of the Mirror Stage was described earlier as the Order associated with identification or "sameness", the Symbolic Order is conceived of as a system which functions according to the principle of difference.[26] To clarify the notion

[26] The third term in the triad of Lacan's Orders, the Real, is not given as great emphasis in Ecrits as are the other two terms. Malcolm Bowie, drawing on Lacan's Seminaire which he views as providing the fullest and most challenging account of the Real, offers the following useful description of this Order:

> "... the Real is that which is radically extrinsic to the procession of signifiers. The Real may be structured – 'created' even – by the subject for himself, but it cannot be named. It is the irremediable and intractable 'outside' of language; the indefinitely receding goal towards which the signifying

of the Symbolic Order, it is necessary at this point to explain and distinguish two of the most esoteric and confusing of Lacanian terms: "the other" with a small "o", and "the Other" with a capital "O". Although I attempt here to enumerate and describe the various contexts in which these terms are used, it must be emphasized that in Lacan's texts they are employed randomly; it is left to the reader to determine the particular sense in which they are applied.

The "other" with a small "o" has a relatively simple application: it is used to designate the person or object involved in dual, immediate relationship with the subject where the mediating activity of the linguistic sign does not intervene. In other words, it can be regarded as the present counterpart to the subject. The "Other" with a capital "O" is a more subtle concept. Firstly, its distinction from the other, or opposite, must be emphasized:

> It must be understood from the outset that the Other is not the Opposite. The opposite is but the Same inverted or reversed: a verbal contradiction, a negative image, a mirror-writing .... easily recognized and restored to its reassuring familiarity. The opposite is a category of logical thought, which arranges the world in neat pairs of things and their contraries, of theses and antitheses, interdependent and mutually exclusive. But the Other is irreducibly, incorrigibly different; exceeding our logical categories, it escapes our apprehension. Hence the malaise provoked by alterity, whose irrepressible existence beyond the pale of our conceptual domain casts doubt upon the hegemony and adequacy of our mode of thought.[27]

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chain tends; the vanishing point of the Symbolic and the Imaginary alike. As a result of this view, the Real comes close to meaning 'the ineffable' or 'the impossible' in Lacan's thought"- Bowie, "Jacques Lacan," pp. 133-134.

[27] Candace Lang, "Aberrance in Criticism?" Substance 41 (1983) p. 3.

The Other, then, can be understood primarily as a locus of difference, the locus from which the Symbolic Order and language receive their definition, or in Lacan's application, it is "the locus in which is constituted the I who speaks to him who hears" (Ecrits p. 141). In other words, it is that absent difference which by its very absence or repression allows that which is present to be identified or defined.

As a locus of difference, the Other can be regarded on the one hand, as a form of collective unconscious, a position of thirdness between the "I" and the "you" of the psychoanalytic exchange; a position towards which the analysand and analyst may project their discourse. On the other hand, the Other may be attributed a more limited application as the locus of the individual unconscious, that "excess" of "absolute" subjectivity which is alienated from the subject in the "splitting" which will be described shortly. This usage of the term by Lacan occurs for example in the following context:

> It speaks in the Other, I say, designating by the Other the very locus evoked by the recourse to speech in any relation in which the Other intervenes. If it speaks in the Other, whether or not the subject hears it with his ear, it is because it is there that the subject, by means of a logic anterior to any awakening of the signified, finds its signifying place. The discovery of what it articulates in that place, that is to say, in the unconscious, enables us to grasp at the price of what splitting (Spaltung) it has thus been constituted (Ecrits p. 285).

However, as Anthony Wilden points out, Lacan — in the manner of Lévi-Strauss by whose work, as already mentioned, he

was considerably influenced – does not favour the concept of the unconscious as an individual, intrapsychic entity, but rather, seeks to interpret it as a function of the social collectivity which generates and sustains it.[28]

Another use of the term, the Other, which has already arisen several paragraphs earlier in this discussion, occurs when reference is made to the parent of the child as the representative of the Symbolic Law. In such contexts the parent or an adult who takes the role of parent stands as the embodiment of the Other or the locus of difference, and may therefore be referred to as the Other. In the following example, Lacan – quite unusually – specifies his particular application of the term when he says "the refusal of castration ... is first of all a refusal of the castration of the Other (initially, the mother)" (Ecrits p. 267).

As these various applications may indicate, the Other is one of the terms in Lacan's discourse which most strongly resists the reader's efforts to arrest and fix its meaning. This resistance is itself a dramatization of the challenge which Freud's postulation of the unconscious presented to the possibility of meaning as simple or literal, and the threat which it constituted to the "autonomy of reason."

Having outlined these applications of the terms the Other and the other, I wish to focus once more on the subject and his initiation into the Symbolic Order. If, in

[28] Wilden in Lacan, Speech and Language, pp. 264-265.

the Mirror Stage, the child experienced the illusion of himself as a totality or unified whole, in the Oedipal Stage he experiences a process of self-division. This entails the Symbolic "castration" or repudiation of the child as "he who is the phallus" (the complement and all-absorbing occupation of the mother), in exchange for the privilege of identity as "he who has the Phallus," the power of Symbolic signification, the power to say "I". Obviously, a distinction is being made here between conventional and specialized use of the term "phallus", but to avoid further digression, I suspend explanation of this distinction until a later stage of the chapter (vide pp. 32-35). For the moment, closer consideration must be given to the concept of a "divided" or "split" subject.

b. The Splitting (Spaltung)

For the present I shall focus on the Oedipal paradigm as an illustration of the genesis of split-subjectivity, suspending consideration of its simultaneous illustration of the genesis of repressed sexual desires which will be discussed in the following section (c).

The infant, having progressed through the Mirror Stage, reaches the point at which he is ready to express his Need verbally.[29] This Need can be described as the impulse to express "absolute" subjectivity or "full" meaning equi-

[29] At this point I introduce the convention of capitalizing the initial letter of the terms Need, Demand and Desire where they have a specialized Lacanian application. This is not however a convention which Lacan himself uses.

valent to union with the mother as other. In his attempt to express his Need, the subject encounters the Oedipal veto: he is compelled by Symbolic Law embodied in the Name-of-the-Father to translate the absoluteness of his Need into the representative linguistic signifiers of Demand, if he is to receive a place, a nomination as a subject, in the Symbolic Order. He is thereby forced to accept in the place of "absolute" subjectivity, a linguistic or representative subjectivity. In other words, he becomes split into a conscious self who is named and is represented as a subject in the signifying system by a signifier, "I", and an unconscious self, an "it" or ça. The latter is constituted by that "excess", that Otherness of "absolute" subjectivity which must be repressed in the gain of linguistic subjectivity that can only represent, but cannot reappropriate, the total presence of the "absolute" self.

To illustrate the "loss" of meaning which takes place in the translation of Need by linguistic Demand, reference may be made to an analogy used by Anthony Wilden in his description of the loss which takes place when perception is translated as identity. He uses the analogy of the distinction between a digital computer such as an adding machine which computes in discrete steps, and an analog computer such as a sun-dial, which computes in continuous functions, and he argues as follows:

> ... identity is digital, whereas perception is analog: therefore any 'identity of perception' necessarily involves some process of TRANSLATION from the analog to

> the digital. Such translations always involve a gain in signification ... but a loss in meaning.[30]

This analogy is useful for describing the transformation of the moi that takes place as a result of language acquisition. Prior to the accession to language, the moi comprises that specular image constructed from attributes reflected in the other, which gives the child some sense of corporeal unity. Once the subject has access to language, he may attempt to translate those "analog" perceptions of himself into a linguistic identity which is "digital". While he may, by the translation, gain a moi of signified identity, in doing so he will lose his sense of totality. Thus the moi will prove a source of dissatisfaction to the subject, for no matter with what attributes he compounds this identity in his search for the missing piece of the total jigsaw, he will simply constitute an endless chain of signification in which the emptiness of his linguistic nomination is displaced from signifier to signifier. The extent of this dissatisfaction in the subject will depend on the extent to which he was captured by the attraction of the specular image in the first place. It is on this conception of the moi or ego that Lacan's most vehement attacks against "ego psychology" are based (see for example Ecrits pp. 226-280). As Malcolm Bowie observes,

> ... if the ego is no more than imaginary precipitate, how absurd it is for proponents of 'ego psychology' to appoint themselves to the task of developing and stabilizing that ghostly entity.[31]

[30] Wilden, "The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real," p. 24.

[31] Bowie, "Jacques Lacan," p. 123.

Returning to the concept of the subject as "split" or "divided": Lacan devoted considerable energy to the demonstration of the epistemological implications of Freud's "split-subject". For example, in his seminar "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud" (Ecrits pp. 146-178), he challenges the conception of the subject as an "entity" which is implicit in the Cartesian cogito. Simplifying this complex and elusive argument, one might say that in Lacan's opinion, Descartes, in formulating the aphorism Cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am), begs the question of the existence of subjectivity in presupposing an "I" who can be the subject of the action of thinking. To suggest thereafter that "being" is conceivable on the basis of that thinking seems to compound the error of logic. Nevertheless, the Cartesian cogito gives the illusion that self can be immediately present to itself, inviting Lacan's criticism that,

> ... the philosophical cogito is at the centre of the mirage that renders modern man so sure of being himself even in his uncertainties about himself, and even in the mistrust he has learned to practise against the traps of self-love (Ecrits p. 165).

According to the Cartesian cogito things directly perceived and present must be things privileged, and concepts such as "truth" and "meaning" which are supposedly fundamental or essential in nature, stem from this belief that "total presence" can be regained by man's consciousness. Inherent in such thinking is the unquestioning acceptance of language and furthermore of perception, as transparent. Lacan's

argument against the cogito, based on linguistic insights which, as already explained, were inaccessible to Freud, calls attention to the material nature of language as a representational medium. Language is necessary to the notion of conscious thought, yet once the subject has described himself in words he has ceased to be a subject to himself. Lacan expresses this conclusion in aphorisms such as,

> In that which thinks (cogitans), I can never constitute myself as anything but object (cogitatum) (Ecrits p. 165).

or more confusingly,

> I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think (Ecrits p. 166).

More simply stated, language and "being" as "essential" "absolute" subjectivity cannot co-exist.

Now Freud, in describing the radical effect of his discovery of the unconscious on the Western conception of subjectivity, compared that discovery to the Copernican Revolution. Shoshana Felman offers a fascinating analysis of the implications of Lacan's return to this "ingenious metaphor." Initially she points out,

> In the same way that Copernicus discovers that it is not the sun that revolves around the earth, but the earth that revolves around the sun, so Freud displaces the center of the human world from consciousness to the unconscious. "Human megalomania," in Freud's terms, thus suffers another "wounding blow" from the psychoanalytical discovery that "the ego ... is not even master of its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously

> in its mind." (Freud 1916-1917: 285) Freud himself thus defines his own originality as subversive: as subversive of the principle of consciousness as a center, and, along with it, of man's narcissistic centrality to himself.[32]

In Lacan's interpretation of Freud, the emphasis shifts: in Felman's opinion, Lacan is not concerned as much with the implications of a change of subjective centre from the conscious to the unconscious, as with the "process of decentering", in other words, the new manner of self-reflection which Freud's insight implies and which cannot be divorced from linguistic signification. As Felman argues,

> In Freud's emphasis, if the Copernican revolution replaces one center with another, displaces the centrality from earth to sun, one could still conceive of the planets as separable, self-contained spatial entities: one could still think of the two centers – the mistaken and the real one – as distinct from each other. In Lacan's explicitly and crucially linguistic model of reflexivity, there are no longer distinct centers but only contradictory gravitational pulls: the two pseudo-centers – "the subject of the signifier" (of the utterance) and "the subject of the signified" (of the statement) – even though they are radically different from each other, are no longer entirely distinct and cannot be separated from each other: each can also be the Other, is "in-mixed" with the Other.[33]

This view of the subject as containing within itself a cleft between the conscious, which is within its linguistic control, and the unconscious, which escapes such control

[32] Felman, "The Originality of Jacques Lacan," p. 54. The quotation of Freud is taken from "Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis," Part III: "General Theory of the Neuroses," The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey, (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, Vol. XVI).

[33] Felman, "The Originality of Jacques Lacan," p. 55.

yet paradoxically may support or, alternatively, subvert it, has radical implications for a study of the reader and the activity of reading. These implications are compounded by Lacan's insight that the unconscious is not only structured like a language, but is itself "a reader". We must, however, suspend discussion of these issues for the present, in order to consider what I have for convenience called "the third effect of the Oedipal Stage", the birth of unconscious Desire.

c. Need, Demand and the "whence" of Unconscious Desire

Sexual desire is presented by Freud as the product of an inherent contradiction brought about when the primary force of the libido encounters the secondary force of repression.[34] He illustrates his theory by means of the Oedipal myth. When Lacan describes unconscious Desire as the bi-product or excess of the translation of Need into linguistic signifiers of Demand, he retains the sexual terms of the Oedipal myth, thereby indicating the equivalence between rhetoric and Freudian sexuality. The "story" of the birth of unconscious Desire — and the genesis of split-subjectivity — which may be pieced together from Lacan's writing is thus the story of the birth of the desire to make meaning, expressed in the terms of sexual myth. I offer the following version of this story while at the

[34] See Felman's discussion of this issue in her article "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," pp. 108-113.

same time, in the form of footnotes, I offer fragments of Lacan's text from which my version has been derived, the intention being to present in parallel the "original", or Lacan's text in its English translation, and its "translation", or the interpretation and paraphrase of the English translation. This may serve as a reminder that Lacan's "original" French text is itself a "return" to that which was problematic in Freud's "original" text, which in its turn sought to "return" to the problematic in the discourse of his analysands, and so forth. The implication is therefore that the following paraphrase and the "original" from which it derives are links in an infinite chain of supplementary interpretive activity which attempts to account for the effects of the Other as that difference which has been repressed from linguistic discourse.

The "story" of the birth of unconscious Desire may be told then, as follows: the infant, progressing through the Mirror Stage, is endowed with a particular Need, the urge to be the phallus to the Mother/the urge to express "meaning". In seeking to express his Need, he encounters the terms of the Law, the veto of the Father/the laws of Symbolic Order. In order to avoid castration/In order to make himself understood, he is forced to adapt his primal Need to the Symbolic Law which permits him restricted expression of that Need and forces him to repress the excess as "forbidden".[35] As a result the individual expresses/

[35] In Lacan's text this is expressed as follows:
"In the first instance, they [the effects of the presence of the

articulates his Need but experiences a gap between his Demand and the urge or the desire which he set out to express. It is this gap, this absence of "full meaning" which gives rise to unconscious Desire.

Henceforward it would seem that any Need/meaning expressed in language as Demand can never be guaranteed to be "simple" or literal for every Demand is potentially ambiguous, receiving its definition in terms of the "excess meaning" which has been repressed from it, or in Anthony Wilden's words, "any demand is essentially a demand for love."[36] Because the nature of the love demanded is not that which can be given – it is not accessible even to the parent in the place of the Other – the child is doomed to disappointment. Every fulfilment of a particular need expressed in Demand is reduced to the crushing of the Demand as a request for love.[37]

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signifier] proceed from a deviation of man's needs from the fact that he speaks, in the sense that in so far as his needs are subjected to demand, they return to him alienated. This is not the effect of his real dependence ... but rather the turning into signifying form as such, from the fact that it is from the locus of the Other that its message is emitted.

"That which is thus alienated in needs constitutes an Urverdrängung (primal repression), an inability, it is supposed, to be articulated in demand, but it re-appears in something it gives rise to that presents itself in man as desire (das Begehren)"(Ecrits pp. 285-286).

[36] Wilden in Lacan, Speech and Language, p. 189.

[37] "Demand in itself bears on something other than the satisfactions it calls for. It is demand of a presence or of an absence – which is what is manifested in the primordial relation to the mother, pregnant with that Other to be situated within the needs that it can satisfy. Demand constitutes the Other as already possessing the 'privilege' of satisfying needs, that it is to say [sic], the power of depriving them of that alone by which they are satis-

It is in the sense of loss that the failed Demands generate that there arises Desire. While Demand is unconditional in its application for love, Desire imposes the "absolute" condition, namely, that it will be satisfied only by the filling of the lack, only by the reappropriation of total presence.[38]

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fied. This privilege of the Other thus outlines the radical form of the gift of that which the Other does not have, namely, its love.

"In this way, demand annuls (aufhebt) the particularity of everything that can be granted by transmuting it into a proof of love, and the very satisfactions that it obtains for need are reduced (sich erniedrigt) to the level of being no more than the crushing of the demand for love ..." (Ecrits p. 286).

[38] "It is necessary, then, that the particularity thus abolished should reappear beyond demand. It does, in fact, reappear there, but preserving the structure contained in the unconditional element of the demand for love. By a reversal that is not simply a negation of the negation, the power of pure loss emerges from the residue of an obliteration. For the unconditional element of demand, desire substitutes the 'absolute' condition: this condition unties the knot of that element in the proof of love that is resistant to the satisfaction of a need. Thus desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting (Spaltung)" (Ecrits pp. 286-287).

The relation between Need, Demand and Desire is also indicated in the following passage:

> "Desire is that which is manifested in the interval that demand hollows within itself, in as much as the subject, in articulating the signifying chain, brings to light the want-to-be, together with the appeal to receive the complement from the Other, if the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this want, or lack.
>
> "That which is thus given to the Other to fill, and which is strictly that which it does not have, since it, too, lacks being, is what is called love, but it is also hate and ignorance.
>
> "It is also what is evoked by any demand beyond the need that is articulated in it, and it is certainly that of which the subject remains all the more deprived to the extent that the need articulated in the demand is satisfied" (Ecrits p. 263).

By definition, Desire is incompatible with language and must remain an unconscious, inexpressible impulse. Any attempt to express Desire entails its translation into signifiers which by their representative nature reduce the "absoluteness" which characterizes Desire. Similarly, the "lost object" of Desire, since it amounts to "full" or "unmediated" meaning or presence or subjectivity, eludes the mediational system of linguistic signification. Every object named through Demand as the object of Desire is doomed to prove inadequate to the satisfaction of Desire. As Anika Lemaire remarks,

> Every object of desire, every object of alienating identification will reveal itself to be necessarily ephemeral and destined to be supplanted because it is incapable of stopping up the lack inscribed in the subject from the start by the very fact of his being eclipsed in the signifier.[39]

It is in order to represent the irreducible absence or lack which is the effect of signification, the absence which gives rise to Desire, that Lacan introduces his "signifier of signifiers", the Phallus.

The Phallus as "Unparalleled Signifier" (Ecrits p. 277)

> The phallus appears to be marching to its own tune, at times in discord with the will or intentions of the subject; it obeys, one might say, the Other; it functions as a part of speech, as a signifier.
>
> — Stuart Schneiderman

It is in the part played by the Phallus in Lacan's

[39] Lemaire, Jacques Lacan, p. 175.

theory that the latter's interpretation of Freudian sexuality in terms of divisive, ambiguous, rather than simple or literal, meaning is particularly evident. Lacan himself makes no typographical distinction between "the phallus" as the image of the male sexual organs, and his own specialized conception of "the phallus" as a signifier – an omission which is in keeping with the general ambiguity and undecidability of his discourse. I have elected, however, to capitalize the latter, specifically Lacanian usage of the term, for the purpose of clarifying my explanations, and in order to draw attention to its radical implications.

The role of the Phallus as signifier is laid down by Lacan as follows in his seminar, "The Signification of the Phallus" (Ecrits pp. 281-291):

> The phallus reveals its function here. In Freudian doctrine, the phallus is not a phantasy, if by that we mean an imaginary effect. Nor is it as such an object (part-, internal, good, bad, etc.) in the sense that this term tends to accentuate the reality pertaining in a relation. It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolizes. And it is not without reason that Freud used the reference to the simulacrum that it represented for the Ancients.
>
> For the phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function, in the intrasubjective economy of the analysis, lifts the veil perhaps from the function it performed in the mysteries. For it is the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier (Ecrits p. 285).

Now, in so far as the Mother does not possess a phallus, and therefore cannot love to the child's Demand in a physical sense, the Phallus, as signifier of absence, relates to the body. However, in so far as Demand is expressed

in language, and language cannot represent the absoluteness of the love that is required of the Other (the Mother as Symbolic Parent) by the subject's Other (the Unconscious) the Phallus relates to the perfection which is absent from linguistic signification. As Barbara Johnson points out,

> ... the definition of the phallus can no longer bear a simple relation either to the body or to language, because it is that which prevents both the body and language from being simple: "The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark where logos is joined together with the advent of desire."[40]

The Phallus, then, signifies the impossible perfection, the impossible object of Desire. However, when it is "unveiled" in the moment of psychoanalytic "recognition", it proves to be — like any other signifier — no more than a signifying presence which has represented absence. In this role as signifier which represents the ultimate absence of the "full truth", the Lacanian Phallus, as the quotation above suggests, demystifies the role played by the phallus as a veiled transcendental presence in the "mysteries".[41]

[40] Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," Yale French Studies, 55/56 (1977) p. 497. Johnson quotes here from the French Ecrits, (Paris: Seuil, 1966) p. 692. The corresponding page in Ecrits: A Selection is p. 287.

[41] In his article "The Horizons of Psychocriticism," Neal Oxenhandler offers a useful explication of the "mysteries" to which Lacan refers in the passage I have quoted from Ecrits. With the aid of diagrams and photographs, Oxenhandler describes the frescoes found in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, and their interpretation by Amedeo Maiuri which Lacan is reputed to have followed. The particularly relevant portion of the fresco is that which represents, in Oxenhandler's words,

> "... a kneeling maiden who lifts one corner of a purple veil, which conceals a huge phallus resting in a tressed basket. This basket or mystica vannus is the winnowing fan carried

Instead the Phallus is the signifier of the inevitable absence of presence which is the effect of signification.

It is on the question of the Phallus that Lacan's critics have been particularly hostile. To avoid digression from the chief concern of outlining Lacan's theories, I offer a summary of some of the more significant criticisms in the form of a footnote.[42]

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in Dionysian harvest celebrations.

> "The lifting of the veil is halted by a winged figure whose left hand is extended across her body in a command of deferral, while her right, raised high above her head, holds a whip, about to descend on the naked back of the young bride ... The winged demon, seen by Maiuri as Pudor or Shame, may be outraged by the showing of the phallus, or perhaps encourages that deferral of the explicitly erotic that is known to fan desire "(Oxenhandler, p. 96).

This arrested unveiling seems to illustrate for Lacan the endless deferral of closure on "the truth", the endless displacement of Desire along a chain of signifiers. (See N. Oxenhandler, "The Horizons of Psychocriticism," New Literary History XIV, 1, (Autumn 1982), pp. 89-103).

[42] Criticisms of Lacan's theories: Because his work has considerable affinity with that of Lacan, one of the most interesting criticisms is that presented by Jacques Derrida (see Gayatri Spivak's useful summary of the chief areas of unease between Derrida and Lacan in her Translator's Preface to J. Derrida, Of Grammatology, (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974 rpt 1978) pp. lxii-lxvii). Derrida's main objections are as follows: beginning from his established standpoint that the general misconception of Western metaphysics is that "full presence" exists and is potentially available for reappropriation, Derrida argues that to centre signification on "absence" is as much a misconception as to centre it on "presence". By postulating the Phallus as the signifier of signifiers representing the absence which arises from signification, Lacan is, in Derrida's terms, merely replacing Logocentrism or the "presence" presupposed by the Word, with Phallogocentrism, the "absence" presupposed by the Phallus as signifier. Lacan, then, is seen as founding his system on a "transcendental signifier". This signifier stands outside the class – the class: "signifiers" – of which it is both a member, yet from which it differs. Its difference lies in the fact that it is the one signifier which is bound in a non-arbitrary relationship, a relationship of "full presence" to its signified: "absence". In reply to Lacan's Phallus, Derrida offers – to the delight of those feminist critics who view Lacan as Phallocentric – the hymen (see Spivak, p. lxvi).

From the preceding description of subjectivity in Lacanian theory, we are presented with a new view of the linguistic subject, and hence, of the reader. In Lacan's terms, he can no longer be conceived of as a subject who, according to the model of the Cartesian cogito, has the potential to be fully present to himself – a self conscious being who is able to reconstruct and control "full meaning"

The second issue on which Derrida takes Lacan to task is that his theories imply that there must be a "truth" towards which analysis ultimately works. This is not, as Spivak points out, "a simple question of objectification of a subjective position," but rather a challenge of the view that there is a point at which the analysand arrests the "otherwise endless movement (glissement) of the signification" (Ecrits p. 303). However, Barbara Johnson, reviewing the transferential relation between Derrida's interpretation and Lacan's text, argues that the very undecidability of Lacan's own discourse, puts Derrida's reading of that discourse as in some way univocal, into doubt. She suggests that Derrida is "framing" Lacan "for an interpretive malpractice of which he himself is, at least in part, the author." (See Johnson, "The Frame of Reference," p. 478).

Another critic who has levelled severe criticism at Lacan from a Marxist/Deconstructive perspective is Michael Ryan (see Ryan, Marxism and Deconstruction (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982) pp. 104-112). Although it is not possible to do justice to his criticisms here, his arguments against Lacan's "clearly antimarxist, roundly antifeminist and theocratic" writing are certainly to be taken seriously. In relation to Ryan's argument that "most women would have difficulty in accepting a turgid penis as the 'privileged signifier' of their sexuality" (p. 108) an alternative perspective has been adopted by certain feminist critics who appear to use the Phallus as a useful weapon against Phallocentrism. As a signifier of "absence", of symbolic castration, the Lacanian Phallus mocks any male claim to sexual supremacy as "empty", founded on "absence". As Jacqueline Rose argues for example, "the phallus stands at its own expense and any male privilege erected upon it is an imposture 'what might be called a man, the male speaking being, strictly disappears as an effect of discourse, ... by being inscribed within it solely as castration.'" (See Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction II", in Feminine Sexuality, p. 44. Her quotation of Lacan comes from his unpublished seminar typescripts: Seminar XVIII, Week 12, p. 4 (1969-1970).

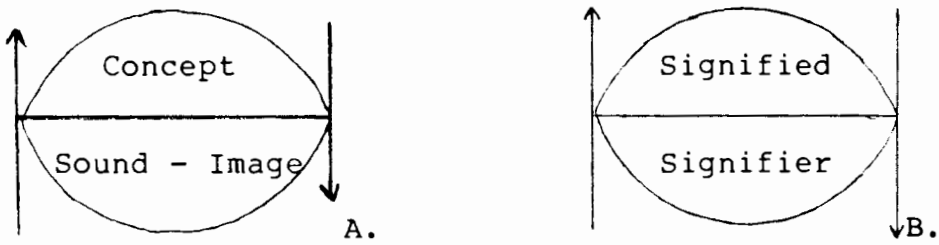
in language. Instead, he is the split subject, irreducibly alienated from himself as the Other. Doomed to experience the manque-à-être (the "gap-in-being" that suggests both "want" as desire and "want" as lack) brought about by his acquisition of language, he is victim of the insatiable unconscious Desire for the "lost object", the "lost meaning" represented by the Phallus which, if attained, would seem to offer the promise of "full meaning", the jouissance of complete satisfaction. In the light of this view of the subject, the activity of reading might be viewed as another manifestation of the quest after the "lost object", the quest to unveil the Phallus and arrive at "the truth". Yet the postulation of the unconscious as "structured like a language" and moreover, as operating like a "reader", must alter our conception of both the process of questing and of "the truth" as quest object. In order to appreciate this altered conception it is necessary to study more closely the view of the unconscious adopted by Lacan. Since this view is dependent on certain concepts of Saussurean linguistics, I shall begin by offering an outline of these.

SECTION II: THE UNCONSCIOUS AS THE OTHER SCENE OF WRITING/READING

Saussurean Linguistics in the Work of Lacan

In laying down the general principles of his linguistic theory, one of Ferdinand de Saussure's primary concerns was to establish a fundamental linguistic unit. This he described as a double entity, formed by the association

of two terms which he represented with the diagram labelled below as "A". Referring to the entire unit as a linguistic "sign", he chose to designate the term "signifier" to the Sound Image, and the term "signified" to the Concept as illustrated in "B".[43]



Although Saussure declared that "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary," he nevertheless also referred to them as "intimately united, and each recalls the other."[44] Thus, while he maintained that the relation between the linguistic sign as a whole and the real object that it represented was arbitrary, in other words that the relation between the two was not a necessary relation, the implication remained that Sound-Image and Concept were inseparably yoked.

When Lacan introduced the concept of the Saussurean linguistic sign into his seminar, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud" (Ecrits pp. 146-178), he replaced Saussure's illustration of the linguistic

[43] F. de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. W. Baskin (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1974 rpt 1978) p. 66 and p. 114 respectively.

[44] Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, pp. 66-67.

sign with the algorithm $\frac{S}{s}$, in which the upper capitalized "S" stands for the signifier, the lower, small, italicized "*s*" for the signified, and the bar between them for the bar of signification which separates the two elements irreducibly.

The significance of this step is considerable. Firstly, the reversal of the positions of signifier and signified from their original positions in the Saussurean diagram is logically consistent with, and a useful illustration of Lacan's notion of the repression of the signified "below the barrier" of signification. The signifier, according to Lacanian theory, takes the place of the signified in the Symbolic Order, paradoxically indicating that which must simultaneously be absent or repressed since the signifier cannot reappropriate the total presence of the signified. Furthermore, this reversal of the positions of signifier and signified illustrates Lacan's argument of the primacy of the signifier: the argument that the referent has no "proper place" or "meaning" until it has been granted nomination in the Symbolic. For Lacan, it is therefore the signifier which orders the signified, rather than the signified, which by its supposed prior existence determines the order to be given to the signifying system.[45]

[45] See Spivak, pp. lxiv-lxv for an explication of Derrida's misgivings about this treatment of the signifier. She points out for example,

> "... Derrida cautions us that, when we teach ourselves to reject the notion of the primacy of the signified – of meaning over word – we should not satisfy our longing for transcendence by giving primacy to the signifier – word over meaning. And, Derrida feels that Lacan might have perpetrated precisely this"(l. lxiv).

A further, and perhaps more significant, consequence of Lacan's algorithmic illustration is indicated by his elimination of the encirclement of the diagram.[46] Instead of illustrating the signifier and the signified as two aspects of one unit, Lacan illustrates them as belonging to two "distinct orders separated initially by a barrier resisting signification" (Ecrits p. 149). In other words, the linguistic sign, far from standing as a unit of original meaning, is itself constituted by the divisiveness of difference, the "bar" between present signifier and absent signified. As Vincent Leitch expresses it,

> At this point Lacan breaks up an old heroic affair, bows before the barrier and celebrates primordial difference as impassable. Ever more intensely his signifier doesn't represent the signified. The Lacanian signifier need not signify at all; it may float free.[47]

And in the words of Lacan himself,

> ... we will fail to pursue the question further as long as we cling to the illusion that the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatever (Ecrits p. 150).

Returning once again to the work of Saussure: in defining what he referred to as "syntagmatic" and "associative" relations in language, Saussure had proposed that the relations and differences between linguistic terms

[46] I owe this observation to Colin MacCabe, James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979) p. 73.

[47] Vincent B. Leitch, Deconstructive Criticism (London: Hutchinson, 1983) pp. 11-12.

fall into two distinct groups, each of which generates a certain class of values. Elements arranged in sequence along the chain of speaking form combinations supported by linearity, and these can be called syntagms. Within a syntagm, which is always composed of two or more units, a term acquires its value only because it stands in opposition to everything that precedes it or follows it, or to both. Outside discourse, co-ordinations form on associative relations, the word acquiring value by virtue of its exchangeability with other words in a potential mnemonic series. Thus, while the syntagmatic relation occurs in praesentia, according to present relations and differences, the associative relation occurs in absentia according to remembered relations and differences.[48]

Years after Saussure, Roman Jakobson, analyzing what he refers to as the "twofold character of language,"[49] observes that any linguistic sign or structure involves two modes of arrangement: combination and contexture on one hand, and selection and substitution on the other. The first mode of arrangement implies that any sign is made up of constituent signs and may occur in combination with other signs. Thus any linguistic unit may both serve as context for simpler units and/or find its own context

[48] Saussure, p. 123.

[49] Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbance," in R. Jakobson and M. Halle, Fundamentals of Language, (The Hague: Mouton, 1956) p. 58.

in a more complex linguistic unit. The second mode of arrangement, substitution, implies the possibility of exchanging one alternative for another, equivalent to the original in one respect, but different from it in another. Jakobson relates combination and contexture directly to Saussure's concept of the occurrence in praesentia of the syntagmatic relation, since the linguistic entities are conjoined either in both the message and the code, or in only the message. Selection and substitution however, deal with entities conjoined only in absentia in the code.[50]

Finally, Jakobson identifies this combinative or connective operation of language as "metonymic" since the figure of speech "metonymy" involves the substitution of one signifier for another on the basis of their contextual association. On the other hand, since "metaphor" involves the substitution of one signifier by another on the basis of their semantic similarity, Jakobson identifies the selective and substitutive operation of language as "metaphoric".

Now Lacan, having introduced the notion of a floating signifier which does not answer to the function of representing a fixed signified, and the concept of glissement or the sliding of the signified under the signifier, applies these ideas to the functioning of metaphor and metonymy. Having established that the elements of the linguistic unit, the signifier and the signified, are divisible, he is able to propose that metonymy operates according to

[50] Jakobson, pp. 60-61

a word-to-word or signifier-to-signifier relation in which one signifier may replace another, although the original signified slips from signifier to signifier, remaining essentially the same. Lacan summarizes this process by the following algorithmic formula, emphasizing that in the metonymic operation of language, the algorithmic bar cannot be crossed:

$$f(S....S')S \cong S(-)s \quad (\underline{\text{Ecrits}} \text{ p. } 164)$$

In this formula, the sign $\cong$ represents "equivalence"; $(-)$ represents the barrier of difference; f means "functions"; S stands for the signifier and s for the signified. We may therefore read the formula as follows: metonymy functions, f, by the equivalence between the first signifier and the second, $S \cong S$; the first signifier hides a displaced original term, S....S', and the second signifier retains the bar of difference which prevents the signifier from ever grasping or merging with the signified, $S(-)s$.[51]

Lacan illustrates this metonymic operation with the example of "thirty sails" used metonymically to replace the phrase "thirty ships." He points out that in the statement "Thirty sails were sighted," the replacement of one signifier ("ships") by another ("sails") on the basis of their frequent contextual association, appears to have

[51] This explication is composed with assistance from the interpretations offered by Leitch (pp. 13-14) and by Maria Ruegg in her article, "Metaphor and Metonymy: The Logic of Structuralist Rhetoric," Glyph 6, (1979) p. 151. Ruegg translates from P. Lacoue-Labarthe and J-L. Nancy, Le Titre de la Lettre (Une Lecture de Lacan) (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1973).

little, if any, effect on the signified (the idea of thirty vessels sailing). At most, metonymy could be said to foreground one aspect of the signification (the spectacle of numerous sails) while the original meaning (the idea of thirty vessels sailing) continues to "insist" in spite of the occultation of the original signifier:

> ... we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that meaning 'insists', but that none of its elements 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable (Ecrits p. 153).

It is this elision from one signifier to the next while the original signified continues to "insist" that Lacan identifies as typical of the operation of unconscious Desire. This Desire, generated in the subject, as we have already seen, by the sense of lack generated through the acquisition of language, propels him in a metonymic elision from linguistic signifier to signifier of Demand in which unconscious Desire manifests itself, in search of the lost "presence", the potential existence of which seems promised in each new signifying chain. In Lacan's words,

> ... it is the connexion between signifier and signifier that permits the elision in which the signifier installs the lack-of-being in the object relation, using the value of 'reference back' possessed by signification in order to invest it with the desire aimed at the very lack it supports (Ecrits p. 164).

In contrast to metonymy, the operation of metaphor depends in Lacan's view on a word-for-word, or signifier-for-signifier, substitution based on the semantic connection between the two signifieds represented. The effect of

this substitution is to compound the associations surrounding the original signifier which remains present by virtue of its metonymic connection with the other elements in the signifying chain. Lacan summarizes this operation with the algorithmic formula,

$$f(\frac{S'}{S}) \cong S\ (+)_s \quad (\underline{\text{Ecrits}}\ \text{p. 164}).$$

This can be interpreted as,

> ... the signifying function of the substitution of one signifier for another ($\frac{S'}{S}$) is equivalent to a "crossing" of the bar which permits the revelation of meaning, the "grasping" of the "signified"—$S(+)_s$.[52]

This substitution, viewed in isolation from the metonymic operation with which it occurs simultaneously, amounts to a "repression" of one signifier (S) by another (S') in a vertical chain which will eventually lead to the original signified. It is this relation which enables Lacan to describe the symptom of the analysand as a metaphor which maintains the repression, in the unconscious, of the original signifiers by which the psychic problem was represented.

It is the combinative, syntagmatic operation of metonymy as displacement and the selective, paradigmatic operation of metaphor as substitution that Lacan introduces to Freud's observations on the unconscious.

[52] M. Ruegg, p. 151.

The Unconscious: "Structured like a Language"

> ... what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language. Thus from the outset I have alerted informed minds to the extent to which the notion that the unconscious is merely the seat of the instincts will have to be rethought (Ecrits p. 147).

In Lacan's opinion, the frequent allusion to language in Freud's work[53] indicates that Freud had detected the correlation between the laws governing language and the laws governing the unconscious, but since his work predated the findings of modern linguistics, he was not able to establish the conclusion that to Lacan was so irrefutable: that the unconscious is structured like a language. One of the areas of research that Freud had used to study the unconscious and to establish the laws by which the unconscious appeared to be operating, was the field of dreams. As Lacan points out,

> One of the reasons why dreams were most propitious for this demonstration is exactly, Freud tells us, that they reveal the same laws whether in the normal person or in the neurotic (Ecrits p. 163).

It is therefore to The Interpretation of Dreams that Lacan devotes particular attention. I shall attempt to summarize as briefly as possible, the conclusions about the unconscious to which Freud came, and the linguistic interpretation which Lacan is able to give to these conclusions.

[53] Lacan remarks, for example,
"In the complete works of Freud, one out of every three pages is devoted to philological references, one out of every two pages to logical inferences ... everywhere a dialectical apprehension of experience, the proportion of analysis of language increasing to the extent that the unconscious is directly concerned"(Ecrits p. 159).

Firstly, in Freud's view, dreams seem to function according to a general and preconditional process of Distortion (Entstellung). The sensory intensity or vividness of particular dream images does not correspond to the psychical intensity of the elements in the dream-thoughts corresponding to them. Instead, "a complete 'transvaluation of all psychical values' takes place between the material of the dream-thoughts and the dream."[54] This process of Distortion can, in Lacan's view be equated to the process of glissement, or the sliding of the signifier, that general precondition of language that determines the signifier's potential to represent "something quite other than what it says" (Ecrits p. 160).

Secondly, according to Freud, the form assumed by dreams is in essence determined by two governing factors: dream Condensation (Verdichtung) and dream Displacement (Verschiebung). In his interpretation of this observation, Lacan associates, on one hand, the Condensation of many latent dream thoughts in one manifest dream image with the linguistic operation of Metaphor in which the substitution of one signifier for another brings about the compounding of associations accruing to both manifest (substitute) and latent (original) signified, but simultaneously condenses these associations in the single manifest (substitute) signifier. On the other hand, he equates the

[54] Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976 rpt 1980) p. 443.

Displacement of latent dream thoughts on to manifest dream images with metonymy. Just as the latent dream thought may be displaced on to a manifest dream image which is only contiguously or contextually connected with the dream thought, so the signified may be displaced on to a substitute signifier with which its original signifier is contiguously or contextually, but not semantically, connected.

What these correlations point to is, that the manifest content of the dream is only part of, or one effect of, an interpretive, "reading" activity — the dream-work — that produces through condensation (metaphor) and displacement (metonymy), the pictographic "text" which represents the dream-thought. When this "text", this manifest content of the analysand's dream, is interpreted by the psychoanalyst, it is effectively being subjected to the process of combination and selection, metonymy and metaphor, that produced it as manifest content in the first place. By giving attention to certain "gaps" or "lapses" in this manifest content, the analyst explores the Other, repressed scene of signification which is not overtly part of the manifest content, but which, by its absence, defines that present content.[55] Thus while the processes of Distortion, Displacement and Condensation indicate that the unconscious is structured like a language, and that the discourse of

[55] I am indebted for these conclusions to the discussion offered by Robert Con Davis in his "Introduction: Lacan and Narration," pp. 852-853.

the unconscious is a "text" that may be "read", they suggest furthermore, that the unconscious itself is a "reader". Shoshana Felman, one of the first of Lacan's explicators to consolidate this implication in his theory, gives attention to the following observations offered by Lacan in an unpublished talk given at Yale University in 1975:

> Freud's first interest was in hysteria. (...) He spent a lot of time listening, and, while he was listening, there resulted something paradoxical, (...), that is, a reading. It was while listening to hysterics that he read that there was an unconscious. That is, something he could only construct, and in which he himself was implicated; he was implicated in it in the sense that, to his great astonishment, he noticed that he could not avoid participating in what the hysteric was telling him, and that he felt affected by it. Naturally, everything in the resulting rules through which he established the practice of psychoanalysis is designed to counteract this consequence, to conduct things in such a way as to avoid being affected.[56]

Felman herself concludes,

> For Lacan, indeed, the unconscious is not only that which must be read, but also, and primarily, that which reads. Freud's discovery of the unconscious is the outcome of his reading of the hysterical discourse of his patients, i.e., of his being capable of reading in this hysterical discourse his own unconscious. The discovery of the unconscious is therefore Freud's discovery, within the discourse of the other, of what was actively reading within himself: his discovery, in other words, or his reading, of what was reading – in what was being read. The gist of Freud's discovery, for Lacan, thus consists not simply of the revelation of a new meaning – the unconscious – but of the discovery of a new way of reading.[57]

[56] J. Lacan, transcribed from a recording of his talk at the "Kanzer Seminar" (Yale University, Nov. 24, 1975) translated from the French by Barbara Johnson and quoted by Shoshana Felman in "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," p. 118.

[57] Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," p. 118.

Clearly, the question which such conclusions prompt is, how does this psychoanalytic discovery affect our view of reading from the perspective of literary theory and criticism? In order to offer some answer to this question, it is necessary to have some conception of the basic principles of the Lacanian analytic procedure in which this "new way of reading" is put into practice. The next and final two segments of this introductory chapter will therefore focus on these principles and the implications they hold for a literary investigation of the reading activity.

The Principles of the Lacanian Psychoanalytic Procedure

To attempt to "outline" a process as subtle as the Lacanian psychoanalytic procedure would seem to be an ambitious undertaking best left to experienced explicators of Lacanian theory.[58] All that I can claim to do in the following, concluding sections of this introductory chapter is to indicate some of the fundamental principles which Lacan laid down as the basis for his analytical procedure, and to suggest what implications these principles might have for the investigation concerning the reader and his reading quest which follows.

Any psychoanalytic procedure which attempts to lead the subject towards "adaptation" or "adjustment" to a par-

[58] See, for example Stuart Schneiderman, Death of an Intellectual Hero, in the Prologue of which the author describes the subject of his book as a rhetorical enactment of his experience of psychoanalysis with Jacques Lacan. Particularly helpful is Chapter 4, pp. 65-80, in which Schneiderman discusses the procedure by which the Lacanian analyst himself graduates from analysis — the requirement that he passe la passe.

ticular set of social norms thereby implies that such norms are to be privileged as "authoritative" and evades the recognition that they are the arbitrary constructs of an equivalently arbitrary and modifiable Symbolic Order. It is not surprising therefore that the Lacanian perspective of psychoanalysis denounces any notion of adaptation as being "the complacent ally of the blemishes that burden society."[59] One of the primary concerns of Lacanian psychoanalysis would seem to be instead, the reduction of the alienation of the conscious subject from his unconscious. Such alienation is seen to be intensified by the condition of misrecognition (méconnaissance) – a failure to recognize that the sense of lack or loss which causes and continues to accompany alienation, has its roots, not in any deficiency of the subject himself, but in the very nature of language as a representative system. Speaking in very general terms, one might say then, that the Lacanian analyst, as "director of the proceedings", must attempt to direct the analysand away from his state of misrecognition (méconnaissance), towards the recognition (reconnaissance) of his relationship to the Other, and of the implications which this relationship entails – implications which I hope will become clear in the course of this discussion. Two points, which emerge from Anthony Wilden's discussion of the relation between misrecognition and recognition, are of particular note here. Wilden argues,

[59] Antoine Vergote, Foreword, Jacques Lacan, by Anika Lemaire, p. xxi.

> ... the distinction between Knowledge (savoir) and truth repeatedly emphasized by Lacan points up the function of méconnaissance and reconnaissance in human life. Truth for the subject is not knowledge but recognition. Mental illness on the other hand is precisely the refusal to recognize that truth; the mechanisms of negation, disavowal, rejection, isolation, and so forth flow from it. But a certain méconnaissance – which we might call sublimation – is essential to health; Dostoievskian hyperconsciousness is no solution. The point is of course that hyperconsciousness or hyperrecognition simply corresponds to the intensity of the loss [the primal "loss" of "full subjectivity", "full meaning" and so forth that accompanies the accession to language].[60]

In the light of these observations it would seem that, firstly, from a Lacanian perspective, all linguistic subjects are regarded as possessing knowledge of the "truth" (the term "truth" here is used in the specialized sense of the discovery that "full truth", "absolute subjectivity" or "full meaning" can never be accessible to the linguistic subject) although this knowledge may nevertheless be obscured by misrecognition. It therefore seems that the aim of psychoanalysis is to direct the subject towards a recognition of the "truth" which paradoxically, he already knows. Furthermore, Wilden seems to establish here a fine distinction between two kinds of méconnaissance. On one hand, there is méconnaissance which refuses to see the "truth", which refuses to acknowledge the fictional nature of the ego and is therefore doomed to an endless quest after the "lost object" which will supposedly complete the jigsaw of identity. In contrast to such méconnaissance is the experience of reconnaissance which subverts the

[60] Wilden in Lacan, Speech and Language, p. 166.

construct of the ego and instigates a recognition of the nature of split subjectivity and Desire as the irreducible products of language acquisition. Wilden indicates the problem that such reconnaissance cannot in practice be a sustained experience since it would then become the hyper-recognition which would simply correspond to the intensity of the subject's sense of loss or alienation from himself. He therefore hypothesizes what might be called "informed misrecognition" or in his own words, "a certain méconnaissance — which we might call sublimation." This seems quite distinct from the uninformed misrecognition of one who is frustrated by his sense of "lack", and who experiences his Desire as a problematic, alienated impulse arising from the yearning after that which has been forbidden. It is rather that sublimation which permits the redirection of the impulse of Desire away from its primary aim (the attainment of the lost object) towards a substitute. This sublimation is not imposed upon the subject by any authority, but is a choice available to one who accepts that "absolute subjectivity," and "absolute truth" must be relinquished if the representative system of language is accepted. This raises one of the central issues with which the principles of Lacanian analysis are concerned: the issue of analytic authority.

It might be assumed that at the start of an analysis, the analyst is visualized as the authority who is in possession of the object of the analysand's quest — the means of identifying the problem and a prescription for its solution.

Lacan however, forestalling any such assumption, dismisses the possibility that the analyst's position is authoritative:

> Let us set out from the conception of the Other as the locus of the signifier. Any statement of authority has no other guarantee than its very enunciation, and it is pointless for it to seek it in another signifier, which could not appear outside this locus in any way. Which is what I mean when I say that no metalanguage can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other. And when the Legislator (he who claims to lay down the Law) presents himself to fill the gap, he does so as an imposter (Ecrits pp. 310-311).

In other words, the analyst in Lacan's view must take the place, not of the analysand's other or alter ego, but of the Other. This however, does not entail taking upon himself the power of the Other, but rather, standing in the place of the Other as the locus of difference. As has already been suggested earlier in this introduction (see pages 15 - 16 and 24), Lacan attacks vehemently, the conception of the ego — both the ego of the patient and that of the analyst — as an agent of adaptation. He dismisses outright, notions of analysis as "striving for 'an emotional re-education of the patient'" (Ecrits p. 226); or as operating according to "the principles of a training of the 'weak' ego, by an ego that one pleases to believe is capable, on account of its 'strength', of carrying out such a project" (Ecrits p. 229). If the analyst seeks to "strengthen" the ego of the analysand, on the basis of the "strength" of his own ego, he is in fact imposing the arbitrary authority of what is no more than a fictional construct (his ego), or alternatively, the arbitrary authority of a par-

ticular psychoanalytic perspective, onto the similarly fictional and arbitrary construct of the ego of the analysand. He therefore, not only overlooks the arbitrariness of his own authority and of the analysand's identity, but at the same time ignores the repressed aspects of the analysand's unconscious, and in Lacan's view, it is indubitably in that which is repressed that the source of the analysand's problem is to be found. Thus Lacan argues, "Certainly the psychoanalyst directs the treatment. The first principle of the treatment ... is that he must not direct the patient" (Ecrits p. 227).

From a Lacanian perspective then, analysis is not to be viewed as a one-way, "univocal" communication between two persons: the analysand who is in the position of ignorance and subservience, consulting the analyst in the position of knowledge and mastery. Instead, it can be seen as taking the shape of a two-way, plurisignificant communication involving four "persons": the conscious and unconscious "selves" of both analysand and analyst. This view is clearly illustrated in Lacan's use of the analogy of a game of bridge where the place of "dummy" is taken by the analyst's conscious self who remains "dumb" or silent to the analysand's Demands for prescriptive advice (Ecrits pp. 229-230). I shall return to the question of this silence shortly. The progress of the Lacanian analysis can be envisaged therefore as dialectical, rather than linear. In Anthony Wilden's words,

> It is in the sense that the dialectical movement of the analysis is not linear, but progressively and cumulatively spiral, and in the sense that the relationship of the two subjects involved is mediated in both directions by subjects who are not present, that Lacan can speak of a "reform" — not so much a reform of psychoanalysis, since the forms upon which it depends are to be found in Freud, but of a reform of our view of the subject from both sides of the couch.[61]

The dialectical movement of the analysis, entailing a passage through the Other as a position of "thirdness" is instigated, it would seem, by the transference. For Lacan, this is the process whereby the analysand attempts to change the position of the analyst from that of auditor, to that of interlocutor, by addressing Demands towards him.[62] These Demands give an indication of the "image" that the analysand has unconsciously imposed onto the person of the analyst — an image which amounts to the alter ego or Idealich of the analysand:

> At the most elementary level, the silent "neutrality" of the analyst (his role as "dummy") enables the subject to project onto him the image of the significant other to whom the subject is addressing his parole vide.[63] This alter ego of the subject is the ego of the subject himself insofar as his ego is the product of a capture by the other (ultimately reducible to the ideal of the ego.)[64]

[61] Wilden in Lacan, Speech and Language, p. xii.

[62] See Wilden in Lacan, Speech and Language, p. xi.

[63] The parole vide, the "empty word" or "vacuous discourse" is described elsewhere by Wilden as "an Imaginary discourse, or discourse impregnated with Imaginary elements which have to be resolved if the subject and analyst are to progress to the ideal point of the parole pleine [full Word]. For Lacan, the main features of this Imaginary discourse are the demands (intransitive in fact) which the subject makes of the analyst" (Speech and Language, p. 185).

[64] Wilden in Lacan, Speech and Language, pp. 167-168.

The Demands or questions of the analysand, as has already been explained (see pp. 28 - 32), are translations of unconscious Desire directed towards the analyst as "he who is supposed to know" or in Lacan's more memorable French phrase, le-sujet-supposé-savoir. It is the analysand's belief that the analyst has the answers to his search for the "truth" which grants the analyst his power to support the transference:

> It is insofar as he is "supposed to know" — however incorrect this is, of course — that the analyst becomes the support of the transference.[65]

The manner in which the analyst supports the transference is paradoxically by his silence, his refusal to respond to, or attempt to satisfy, the Demands which the analysand addresses to him in the transference. Lacan argues adamantly:

> To what I hear, I have nothing more to say if I understand nothing, and if I do understand something I am sure to be mistaken. However, this is not what would stop me from replying. It's what happens outside analysis in such a case. I keep quiet. Everybody agrees that I frustrate the speaker, him first, but me too. Why?
>
> If I frustrate him it is because he asks me for something. To answer him, in fact. But he knows very well that it would be mere words. And he can get those from whomever he likes. It's not even certain that he'd be grateful to me if they were good words, let alone if they were bad ones. It's not these words he's asking for. He is simply asking me ... from the very fact that he is speaking; his demand is intransitive, it carries no object with it.
>
> Of course, his demand is deployed on the field of an implicit demand, that for which he is there: the demand to cure him, to reveal him to himself, ... But, as he knows, this demand can wait. His present de-

[65] Lacan, Speech and Language, p. 72, footnote mm.

> mand has nothing to do with this, it is not even his own, for after all it is I who have offered to speak to him. (Only the subject is transitive here.)
>
> In short, I have succeeded in doing what in the field of ordinary commerce one would dearly like to be able to do with such ease: with supply I have created demand (Ecrits p. 254).

It is evident that, were the analyst to respond to the Demands of the analysand by, for example, prescribing to him through the metalanguage of an analytic theory, he would effectively be fixing the analysand's subjective position as "he who must receive the Law," and maintaining the repression of the analysand's Desire as "that which must be forbidden." However, since the analyst is not the alter ego of the analysand, he remains silent to the latter's Demands.

It is through his refusal to assume the role of alter ego in which the analysand casts him that the analyst passes to the role of the Other, the place of "thirdness" in the discourse. This process is described by Wilden as follows:

> ... the analyst is himself neither an object nor an alter ego; he is the third man. Although he begins by acting as a mirror for the subject, it is through his refusal to respond at the level consciously or unconsciously demanded by the subject (ultimately the demand for love), that he will eventually (or ideally) pass from the role of "dummy", whose hand the subject seeks to play to that of the Other with whom the barred subject of his patient is unconsciously communicating. The mirror relationship of ego and alter ego which was the obstacle to recognition of his unconscious desire which the subject has set up and maintained will be neutralized, the subject's mirages will be "consumed", and it will be possible for the barred subject to accede to the authenticity of what Lacan calls "the language of his desire" through his recognition of his relationship to the Other.[66]

[66] Wilden in Lacan, Speech and Language, p. 168.

This "recognition of his relationship to the Other" would seem to entail for the analysand, among other things, an acceptance of his Desire as that which must, by definition, always be elsewhere: it is the Desire of the Other.[67] Coupled with this is the acceptance of the unconscious, the Other, as that "knowledge" of which nobody can be the subject, the authority. It is "authorless and ownerless, to the extent that it is a knowledge which no consciousness can master or be in possession of, a knowledge which no conscious subject can attribute to himself, assume as his own knowledge."[68] The silence of the analyst, his refusal to assume the power of one who knows, is effectively a refusal to crush or repress with words, the "silence" of

[67] The following résumé of the analytical progress offered by Stuart Schneiderman may be helpful here:

> "At the beginning of an analysis the analyst is an enigma, a being of desire, whose desire is indefinite. The analyst's desire is not for this or for that; there is no object that can satisfy it. We call it pure desire; it wants ..... but not this or that. In the transference the analysand takes this desire for his own, in the two senses of the word "takes." At first he believes that it is his own; he sees in the analyst's desire the desire that would be his were he not alienated from it. And eventually he will take this desire away from the analyst, reducing the latter to something like an old rag. At the termination of a psychoanalysis there is no identification of analyst and analysand; the analysand discards his analyst and buries his analysis because he has assumed the Other's desire and has learned to negotiate with a desire that is elsewhere. He no longer desires to continue his psychoanalysis; he wants to get on with things, to reenter the course of things, its discourse (Death of an Intellectual Hero, pp. 83-84).

[68] Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," p. 128.

the unconscious as that knowledge which cannot name itself.[69] Since there is no "Other of the Other," no safe, authoritative place outside Otherness – in the analytic situation, outside "madness" – any attempt to interpret the discourse of the analysand must find itself repeating, redramatizing, the very structure which it seeks to analyze. For to interpret the discourse, to make "meaning" where there has been ambiguity or contradiction, involves the refusal of such ambiguity, the repression of "difference" and it is precisely such repressed material which has rendered the analytic exercise necessary.

The analysand must recognize furthermore, that to be a linguistic subject is not to be an "entity", but rather to occupy a particular position and function in language which itself is defined by those positions and functions which are repressed as different. As Malcolm Bowie expresses it,

> ... the subject is no <u>thing</u> at all and can be grasped only as a set of tensions, or mutations, or dialectical upheavals within a continuous, intentional, future-directed process.[70]

The progress of analysis then entails the analysand's investigation, through his own discourse, of the variable positions which are accessible to him in language. In

[69] Lacan remarks, "The unconscious is knowledge; but it is a knowledge one cannot know one knows, a knowledge which cannot tolerate knowing it knows." – "Les Non-dupes errent," (unpublished) quoted by Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," p. 166.

[70] Bowie, "Jacques Lacan," p. 131.

the course of this procedure, he is effectively being initiated – through the silence of the analyst, through the latter's assumption of the position of the Other – into the "new way of reading" described earlier. The quest object of this "new way of reading" is no longer the discovery of the answer to the analysand's problem, or the "truth" as solution to the mystery of his frustration (what his discourse means), but rather discovery of the conditions necessary for "meaning" or "truth" to be apparent at all (how his discourse can mean).[71] The supporting of the transference enables the subject to return, through the process of regression, to the "primal scene" in which his frustrations had their "origin." Whether this "primal scene" is viewed as a "real" remembered event or as a necessary product of the analysand's discursive requirements, and is therefore fictional or tropological, is not important.[72] What is important is its function: rather than a literal occurrence, a "phallus" to be "unveiled" as ultimate truth, it is an experience of "primary reading" in which the repression of difference or ambiguity permits the possibility of interpretive meaning. What is unveiled is "absence", or in other words, what is recognized is,

[71] This conclusion is drawn with the assistance of Felman's ideas in "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," p. 119.

[72] See Jonathan Culler's interesting discussion in "Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative," in The Pursuit of Signs, (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) in particular pp. 169-181. He outlines two principles of narrative in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, one moving from cause to the relation of effects, the other moving from effects to the deduction of cause.

that in order for discourse to have meaning, alternatives to that meaning must be excluded or repressed.

This brings us to the vital role of narrative as a form of conscious discourse. As I have already explained, the excluded Other, or repressed meaning of unconscious knowledge is inaccessible to the subject. One of the only ways then, in which he can be made aware of this repressed meaning — this Other scene of writing/reading — is through conscious discourse or narration. Only through the order and continuity of narration can evidence of unconscious interpretive activity manifest itself in the verbal slip, the lapsus, the "gap" or joke which indicates that which has been excluded, that "non-sense" which, by its absence supports the present sense of the utterance. In Robert Con Davis's words,

> Narration — irremediably diachronic and synchronic — repeats and represents unconscious discourse in the only way the unconscious can be known; as a sequence of opportunities for linguistic substitution and (re)combination. The potential for continuity and unity in such sequences makes possible the "gaps" or "lapses" that indicate the "Other" scene of signification, the repressed scene of writing not a part of manifest narration but which (like a buoy, or series of buoys) holds it up and enables it to exist at all.[73]

It is this view of narration that has particularly interesting implications for a study of reading. On the one hand, the narrative text can be attributed authority: traditionally, the author is regarded as "the master," the one presumed to know. Yet, if we argue that the very

[73] Davis, "Introduction: Lacan and Narration," p. 853.

continuity and order of narrative "knowledge" is what reveals the "gaps" or "lapses" indicating the Other scene of writing, then it becomes clear that in the very process of expressing what it "knows", the narrative text paradoxically must also reveal the blind-spots of its knowledge, that which it does not know, that which it cannot resolve or translate through its discourse. In the process of authorizing its knowledge, it unconsciously displaces, or transfers, its authority onto the reader as the sujet-supposé-savoir, or he who is in a position to unveil/translate that which the narrative does not know. Yet the reader, in the very act of responding to this interpretive challenge is himself forced to assume the paradoxical role of a knowing/blind narrator. It is this strangely paradoxical nature of the reader as interpreter of narrative discourse that this thesis undertakes to explore.

THE QUEST OBJECT OF THIS THESIS AS A READING

Having attempted to delineate the fundamental concepts underlying Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, I shall now briefly map out the course I shall try to follow in exploring the implications of these concepts for reading as textual interpretation.

Since one of the most radical implications of Lacan's insights appears to be the discovery of a "new way of reading" arising from the hypothesis that the unconscious is both structured like a language and is itself a reader,

the first issue I should like to explore is the possibility that certain literary texts might authorize a "traditional reading" – the pursuit of what a text means – while others might provoke a reading equivalent to the "new way of reading" to which the Lacanian psychoanalytic procedure points – a reading which pursues the question of how a text means. The first chapter of the thesis will therefore involve a comparison of the textual strategies employed by two texts which, I shall argue, provoke two radically different modes of reading. The first of these texts is a contemporary detective novel, The Blue Hammer (1976), by Ross Macdonald. Like most detective fiction, this novel can be seen as a metaphorization of the literary quest after "the truth" or the conclusive meaning. It does not, however, concern itself with questions about the nature of truth or the nature of the authority by which truth is established. By way of contrast, the second novel, chosen from the ranks of the French nouveau roman, The Erasers (Les Gommes) (1953) by Alain Robbe-Grillet, might be described as an "anti-detective novel" which undertakes to expose precisely those conditions upon which the successful attainment of the quest object in the first text depends.

The second issue I shall investigate is the supplementarity of the relationship between the narrator as "author" of textual discourse and the reader as interpreter or translator. Using William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! (1936), I shall explore the possibility that narration

is an effect of reading; that the Other as the unknowable, is transferred from narrator to reader as an experience of conflict between accessible and repressed meaning — a conflict which reproduces itself in the reader as the Desire to resolve the conflict, or make meaning. In the third chapter, using Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita (1955), I shall explore the implications of Lacan's translation of Freudian sexual mythology in linguistic terms. If "the Other" is forbidden/that which is beyond expression in conscious discourse, what does this imply about the aspirations of art — or for our purposes, the aspirations of literary art — to satisfy Desire, attaining "the Other" and achieving "full disclosure" of "the truth"?

In the fourth chapter, I shall attempt to synthesize and elaborate on the arguments presented in the preceding chapters, in a reading of Henry James's What Maisie Knew (1897).

As this resumé shows, the novels I have chosen to work with in this thesis are selected from a fairly wide temporal spectrum. Notably then, while the novels of Macdonald, Robbe-Grillet and Nabokov may be regarded as contemporary with the early and intermediate phases of Lacan's career, Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! although post-Freudian, predates the publication of Lacan's Ecrits (Paris: Seuil, 1966), and Henry James's What Maisie Knew predates Freud's seminal publication on the unconscious, The Interpretation of Dreams (1900). This spectrum is intended to reflect,

firstly, an equivalence between Lacan's insights and those of certain authors such as Robbe-Grillet and Nabokov working contemporarily with him. At the same time, it is intended to demonstrate that, fascinating as these equivalences may be, they by no means outshine the achievements of earlier writers, who without the advantages of recent epistemological insights, nevertheless noticed and attempted to account for the effects of that manifestation which was to be named "the unconscious" by Freud and which was subsequently to be recognized as an effect of language by Lacan.

* * * * *

As an afterword to this introduction and a foreword to the thesis proper, a final/prefatory Lacanian warning must be re-echoed:

> ... there is no Other of the Other. And when the Legislator (he who claims to lay down the law) presents himself to fill the gap, he does so as an imposter (Ecrits pp. 310-311).

Throughout the course of this thesis, the reader who writes it and the reader who reads it must be reminded that as an investigation of the reader's quest, the discourse of the thesis has been compelled to assume a discursive position outside that quest, from which to draw its conclusions. However, even from this position, it cannot escape the paradox that it is itself a quest — a "meta-quest" — which

repeats the very activities upon which it seeks to comment. Consequently, even as it performs the role of "commentary-upon-the-quest" it must find itself forgetting or repressing its simultaneous role of "performance-of-the-quest", and therefore of "material-under-scrutiny". If it is to recognize the latter roles, it must simultaneously disrupt its authoritative status as commentary. Thus, the thesis must find itself redramatizing the very split in the reading position which is one of its objects of scrutiny.

* * * * *

CHAPTER ONE

WHODUNIT OR WHODONUT: READING AS CONSUMPTION?

> Le roman policier a ceci de particulier que la figure narrative qu'il emblématise est celle-là même d'une question interprétative: puisque l'histoire du crime qui fait l'objet du roman est, au départ, enrobée de mystère pour le détective comme pour le lecteur, et ne sera comprise, éclaircie, reconstituée qu'à la fin; puisqu'il incombe donc au détective – accompagné du lecteur – d'interpréter les données lacunaires pour en déchiffrer l'histoire, c'est-à-dire pour trouver – mais seulement à la fin – la position de savoir qui permette de raconter l'histoire en tant que récit classique, le policier met en acte la lecture et thématise la figure du lecteur à l'intérieur même de son récit.
>
> – Shoshana Felman[1]

[1] "The particularity of the detective novel is that the narrative shape which it embodies is precisely that of an interpretive question: since the story of the crime which forms the object of the novel is from the outset clothed in mystery, for the detective as for the reader, and will not be understood, illuminated, reconstructed until the end; since it is therefore encumbent upon the detective – accompanied by the reader – to interpret the lacunary givens in order to decipher the story, that is to say, to find – but only at the end – the position of knowledge which permits the relating of the story as conventional narrative, the detective novel enacts reading and thematizes the figure of the reader in the very interior of its narration." (Shoshana Felman, "De Sophocle à Japrisot (via Freud), ou pourquoi le policier?" Littérature, 49 (février 1983) p. 24, my translation).

In the preceding Introduction I have tried to demonstrate that according to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, man's world receives meaning in terms of that network of cultural and linguistic codes that constitutes what we may call the Order of the Symbolic. Intrinsic to this view is the recognition of language as a representative, material system rather than a transparent medium. By virtue of the same recognition, leaders in literary theory and practice have come to question the relationship between the literary text and the "reality" it supposedly represents. The popular conception of the realistic novel as the product of careful representation or mirroring of the reality which precedes it, has been challenged by statements such as this:

> For a particular society, ... the work that is realistic is that which repeats the received forms of 'Reality'. It is a question of reiterating the society's system of intelligibility.[2]

Just as Lacanian theory has focused on the Symbolic Order as a system of arbitrary conventions supported by, and conversely subvertible by, the Other as repressed difference, so literary practitioners have given considerable attention to the operation of linguistic and literary conventions in literary discourse; to the effects and implications of conforming to, or subverting such conventions.

Now, for many years, detective fiction, largely by virtue of its formulaic, uniform structure, has been treated

[2] Stephen Heath, The Nouveau Roman, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972) p. 21.

perfunctorily by literary critics, many of whom dismiss the detective novel as presenting,

> ... predictable problems of no intrinsic interest, stereotyped characterisations, and undistinguished writing – in short, a literature for puzzle addicts and thrill seekers produced at best by ingenious purveyors of commodities.[3]

With the recent increase of attention to literary conventions and their operation, the highly conventionalized structure of the detective novel has proved of central interest, not only to avant-garde novelists who wish to explore the effects of subverting convention, but to literary theorists and critics who seek to identify and describe the processes and implications of both conformity and subversion.

It is because the detective novel provides a relatively simple model of the operation of the conventions of realist fiction and, more significantly, because, in the words of Shoshana Felman, it "enacts reading and thematizes the figure of the reader in the very interior of its narration,"[4] that I have chosen to proceed now with a "detective investigation". The first task will be to investigate the textual conditions which permit the sleuth in the conventional

[3] Dennis Porter, The Pursuit of Crime, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981) p. 3. This resumé of common attitudes of literary critics should not be read as an indication of Porter's own approach to the subject. On the contrary, his comprehensive discussion of crime fiction has proved extremely useful to this investigation.

[4] "... le policier met en act la lecture et thématise la figure du lecteur à l'interieur même de son récit" – Felman, "De Sophocle à Japrisot" p. 24, my translation.

detective novel to arrive at "the truth", the final "explosion de la verité."[5] The second task will be to investigate how such conditions might be subverted by the authorization of the very possibilities which the conventional detective novel conscientiously represses, and what the implications of such subversion might reveal about the reader and his quest for "truth".

* * * * *

At the start of the detective story, the detective is in the position of an interpreter or reader who is confronted with a mystery, a failure in meaning or rupture of order in the "text" of the world. The task he undertakes is to unearth concealed evidence or to recognize and translate ambiguities, and to resolve his findings into a solution, a reading, that will restore order satisfactorily. Since, then, the detective can be seen as a paradigm of the reader, and since the focus of this thesis is the reader and his interpretive activity, it seems appropriate to begin this inquiry with a study of the detective-hero of a popular detective novel, The Blue Hammer by Ross Macdonald.

Macdonald belongs to a tradition of detective story writers commonly referred to as "hard-boiled" and first represented in America in the late 1920's and early 1930's by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. The works of

[5] Michel Butor quoted by Stephen Heath in The Nouveau Roman, p. 34.

these writers are generally regarded as less formulaic and more novelistic than the "classical" detective stories of "pure puzzle, pure ratiocination associated with Poe, Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie."[6] Particularly useful to my purposes is Macdonald's practice of incorporating references to Freudian psychology into his novels.[7] Such references are evident in The Blue Hammer which in its setting on the West Coast of California and its descriptions of the further exploits of detective-hero Lew Archer, is typical of Ross Macdonald's fiction. Let us begin then, by investigating the credentials of Lew Archer.

The Detective as Questing Reader

From the outset of his quest through the text of The Blue Hammer, the reader is assured of the presence of an experienced guide and mentor. Lew Archer takes the place of a first-person narrator, an authoritative, originating "I", antecedent to the text, not only describing clearly what he himself sees, but being himself seen and addressed by name as a "real" character who has a proper place in a "real" world:[8]

[6] Michael Holquist, "Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction," New Literary History, 3 (1971/2) p. 139.

[7] This observation is corroborated by Geoffrey Hartman in his essay, "Literature High and Low: The Case of the Mystery Story," in The Fate of Reading and Other Essays, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975) p. 209.

[8] See Dennis Porter's discussion of the function of the "highly visible narrator,"-The Pursuit of Crime, pp. 91-92.

> I drove up to the house on a private road that widened at the summit into a parking apron. When I got out of my car I could look back over the city and see the towers of the mission and the courthouse half submerged in smog. The channel lay on the other side of the ridge, partly enclosed by its broken girdle of islands.
>
> The only sound I could hear, apart from the hum of the freeway which I had just left, was the noise of a tennis ball being hit back and forth. The court was at the side of the house, enclosed by high wire mesh. A thick-bodied man in shorts and a linen hat was playing against an agile blonde woman. Something about the trapped intensity of their game reminded me of prisoners in an exercise yard.
>
> The man lost several points in a row and decided to notice my presence. Turning his back on the woman and the game, he came towards the fence.
>
> 'Are you Lew Archer?'
>
> I said I was.
>
> 'You're late for our appointment.'
>
> 'I had some trouble finding your road.'[9]

If, as Jonathan Culler argues, "the basic convention which governs the novel ... is our expectation that the novel will produce a world,"[10] this convention is clearly evident in this introduction. Not only does the text provide the reader with a world, but in Archer, it also provides him with a clear means of orientation to it.

That Archer is a perceptive and accurate interpreter of the "text" of the world before him is almost immediately confirmed. For example, he is quick to detect that the "game" of tennis which the Biemeyers are playing is a means of diversion from their mutual sense of frustration and oppression in each other's company: "Something about the

[9] Ross Macdonald, The Blue Hammer, (Glasgow: Fontana Collins, 1976 rpt. 1978) p. 5. All subsequent references to this text will be included in the body of the chapter using the abbreviation "BH" followed by the relevant page number.

[10] Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics, (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975 rpt. 1980) p. 189.

trapped intensity of their game reminded me of prisoners in an exercise yard." The accuracy of his reading is supported by the acerbity of their subsequent dialogue:

> 'I'm Ruth Biemeyer. You must be thirsty, Mr Archer. I know I am.'
> 'We won't go into the hospitality routine,' Biemeyer said. 'This man is here on business.'
> 'I know that. It was my picture that was stolen.'
> 'I'll do the talking, Ruth, if you don't mind.'
> (BH p. 6)

If "every detective novel ... constitutes as it were, a school of suspicion, in which the lesson is a warning against naïve reading ..."[11] Lew Archer is a well-trained, experienced scholar and as such an admirable mentor to the reader who accompanies him in his quest. One of the lessons Archer has learned most thoroughly, is to mistrust literal signification, and to anticipate the possibility of concealed, alternative meaning. This interpretive expertise is manifested, for example, when Ruth Biemeyer, describing the painting which has been stolen from her house and which she is in the process of engaging Archer to recover, mentions the mysterious disappearance of the Californian artist Richard Chantry who was reputed to have painted the picture:

> 'Where did Richard Chantry disappear from?'
> 'From here,' she said. 'From Santa Teresa.'
> 'Recently?'
> 'No. It was over twenty-five years ago. He simply decided to walk away from it all. He was in search of new horizons, as he said in his farewell statement.'

[11] "... tout roman policier constitue ... en quelque sorte, une école de soupçon, dont l'instruction est un avertissement contre la lecture naïve." — Felman, "De Sophocle à Japrisot," p. 32, my translation.

> 'Did he make the statement to you, Mrs Biemeyer?'
> 'Not to me, no. He left a letter which his wife made public.' (BH p. 7)

If Ruth Biemeyer reads Richard Chantry's disappearance as the signifier of a "simple decision", Archer perceives the possibility of alternative signifieds. While she finds Chantry's letter to his wife touching, Archer, on reading it himself, is sceptical:

> I handed the framed letter back to Ruth Biemeyer. She held it against her body. 'It's beautiful, isn't it?'
> 'I'm not sure. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. ...'
> (BH p. 13)

It is this interpretive scepticism which enables Archer to unveil meaning where previously there had appeared to be mystery, or conversely, to reveal corruption where there had appeared to be respectability. This scepticism is particularly manifested in his demystifying descriptions of the society and surroundings in which he moves. In the two extracts quoted below for example, he reveals his awareness of the difference underlying what might at first sight appear to be the panoramic manifestations of the realized "American Dream":

> A. I drove along the waterfront towards the lower town. There were white sails on the water, and gulls and terns in the air like their small flying counterparts. I stopped on impulse and checked in at a motel that faced the harbour.
>
> The lower town was a blighted area standing above the waterfront about ten blocks deep. There were blighted men wandering along the main street or leaning against the fronts of the secondhand stores.
> (BH pp. 14-15)

B. The university had been built on an elevated spur of land that jutted into the sea and was narrowed at its base by a tidal slough. Almost surrounded by water and softened by blue haze, it looked from a distance like a medieval fortress town.

Close up, the buildings shed this romantic aspect. They were half-heartedly modern, cubes and oblongs and slabs that looked as if their architect had spent his life designing business buildings. (BH p. 23).

In passage A, Archer demystifies the apparent gaiety and sense of freedom in the lower town by the juxtaposition of the blithely carefree "white sails on the water" and "their small flying counterparts," against the "blighted" town, its "blighted" inhabitants and its "secondhand stores" where novelty and frivolity are alien. In passage B, the university, compared to a "medieval fortress town" might be expected to stand for the custodianship of the community's values and ideals. To Archer's experienced eye, the values which this institution preserves are contemporaneity without innovation and the sterility of mass production next to which individualism is irrelevant. Nevertheless, if Archer, as professional sceptic unveils "otherness", it is always "the other" as logical opposite, the other side of the same coin, rather than "the Other" as irreducibly strange, untranslatable difference (vide my discussion of the Other and the other on pp 19 - 21 of the preceding Introduction). Such ambiguity is therefore always interpretable in rational terms. If, on occasion Archer is confronted by a multiplicity of signs which he is temporarily at a loss to resolve into a coherent pattern, this condition only persists long enough to foreground his ultimate interpretive success. His disdain towards mass production and capitalism, his

indifference to money – except where it serves as a means to his investigative ends – his operation as a "private eye" who succeeds in spite of, rather than with the help of, society's own problem-solvers, the police: all these factors contribute to the characterization of Archer, and the detective investigator in general, as independent and self-sufficient agent – "the latest of the uncooptable heroes."[12] If the reader recognizes a world besieged by inefficient bureaucracy, obtuse judiciaries and corrupt legal administration as familiar to his own experience, he receives the comforting reassurance from the detective novel that there may still be individualists and heroes like Lew Archer, who can coerce meaning from the world's apparent disorder.

The world presented by the detective novel is not only "real" then, it is also "significant". It is a network of signs permitting only that which contributes to the jigsaw of meaning. Any lack of meaning which occurs in the detective novel is the product, not of inherent undecidability, an unexpected emergence of an Otherness that has been repressed, but rather of inadequate reading, or faulty interpretation, and since the detective, a Master-reader, does not misinterpret, lack of meaning cannot persist under his scrutiny. As Michael Holquist remarks,

> The detective, the instrument of pure logic, [is] able to triumph because he alone in a world of credulous men, holds to the Scholastic principle of adequatio

[12] Geoffrey Hartman, "Literature High and Low," p. 221.

> rei et intellectus, the adequation of mind to things, the belief that the mind, given enough time, can understand everything. There are no mysteries, there is only incorrect reasoning.[13]

I shall be returning in the course of this discussion to the figure of the detective, in order to consider at what price his rationality succeeds what signs he cannot afford to scrutinize and what questions it is not worth his while to raise. For the moment, let us consider the nature of the mystery that he does undertake to investigate.

Pursuing the Lack in the Detective Novel

The constitutive centre of the detective novel is the crime – the mysterious event which sets in motion the questioning process of which the narrative is composed. The question which the detective novel both poses and simultaneously answers is determined by the crime, and since life is the highest value at risk, the most provocative and easily identifiable crime is murder. The component which is invariably missing and which is therefore necessary in order to recuperate the meaning of the crime, is the identity of the criminal; thus the detective novel is commonly structured around the question of identity: who is the criminal? Who is the murderer?

In the case of The Blue Hammer Lew Archer is initially employed to investigate the theft of a valuable painting, reputed to be the work of an acclaimed Californian artist, Richard Chantry. His questions about the painting do not

[13] Michael Holquist, "Whodunit and Other Questions," p. 141.

initially lead to "the truth", but rather to other questions. Thus "Where is the painting?" becomes displaced by the question, "Where is the painter?" and "Who stole the painting?" by "Who killed the art-dealer Paul Grimes, the artist Jake Whitmore, the artist William Mead, the anonymous person buried in the Chantry greenhouse, and perhaps the missing artist, Richard Chantry?" To borrow an analogy of Lacanian theory, we might say that the detective's wish-to-know, and implicitly the reader's too, is displaced along a chain of metonymic or contiguously linked signification in which the "truth" seems always to be slipping away. The detective and the reader seem doomed to be always a few steps behind, always facing the absence of meaning produced by the emergence of the next question. As Geoffrey Hartman argues,

> ... it is clear that life is always in some way too fast for us, that it is a spectacle we can't interpret or a dumbshow difficult to word ... "mystery" means that something is happening too fast to be spotted. We are made to experience a consciousness (like Oedipa's in Thomas Pynchon's Crying of Lot 49) always behind and running; vulnerable therefore, perhaps imposed on. But we are also allowed to triumph (unlike Oedipa) over passivity when the detective effects a catharsis or purgation of consciousness, and sweeps away all the false leads planted in the course of the novel.[14]

The detective's arrest of this flight of meaning which threatens to diffuse into an irreducible hole in the fabric of the text, is determined by a very particular set of conditions. The next task must therefore be to explore

[14] Hartman, "Literature High and Low," p. 207.

these conditions and their implications for the interpretive activity of reading.

Boundaries and Identities:
The Conditions of Meaning in the Detective Novel

The reading of fiction can be regarded as a participation in a form of contract, the terms of which should be implicitly recognized by both writer and reader. While these terms may vary from one genre of text to another, there are certain codes which readers have come through tradition to expect of fiction. In her article "The Question of Readability in Avant-Garde Fiction," Susan Suleiman offers a useful summary of some of the most essential of these:

> ... a readable text corresponds to a familiar order, a previously learned code. In the case of the novel, the chief expectations that generations of readers have internalized concern some fundamental notions in our culture, and perhaps in all cultures: the principle of noncontradiction (an event cannot occur and not occur at the same time, and thing cannot exist and not exist at the same time), the notions of temporal succession and causality (events follow each other and are related to each other consequentially), a belief in the solidity of the phenomenal world (a table is a table is a table), and a belief in at least a relative unity of the self (a name designates a person who has certain fixed characteristics and a set of identifiable ancestors).[15]

Without wishing to set up this particular summary, or the principles it identifies as in any way complete, I do maintain that it incorporates some of the most fundamental

[15] Susan Suleiman, "The Question of Readability in Avant-Garde Fiction," Studies in Twentieth Century Literature, 6, 1-2 (1982) p. 19.

presuppositions upon which Western epistemology has been based. On these grounds I judge it to be a useful index against which to assess a text's conformity to conventional expectations.

With regard to The Blue Hammer, as a conventional detective novel, its conformity to the "principle of non-contradiction" and "belief in the solidity of the phenomenal world" seem givens which hardly require elaborate demonstration. Suffice it to say that invariably "contradiction" in detective fiction is treated as an index of deception, misunderstanding or ignorance, while the activity of questioning the solidity of the phenomenal world would, from the outset be regarded as appropriate to the field of philosophy rather than to criminal investigation. However, the application of the other two principles which Suleiman names are more interesting particularly in comparison with their treatment in the second text to be discussed in this chapter, Robbe-Grillet's The Erasers.

Considering first the treatment of "temporal succession and causality" in The Blue Hammer: it is possible to demonstrate the text's conformity to the norm by using Gérard Genette's temporal categories of Order, Duration and Frequency.[16] Considering first temporal Order: in

[16] Since Genette's own presentation of these categories in his Narrative Discourse is both lengthy and minutely thorough, I have found it more practical for the purposes of this brief discussion to use the summary of his analysis offered by Christine Brooke-Rose in her work, A Rhetoric of the Unreal, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp. 312-320. See also G. Genette, Narrative Discourse, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).

Genette's analysis of Time, this refers to the order in which events are related as opposed to the order in which they supposedly "occur". It is conventionally accepted that the narrative order of events may be changed as long as the transitions – the prolepses or movements forward in relation to the time of narration, and the analepses or movements back in time – are clearly indicated. Temporal Order in the detective novel is complicated by the peculiarity of the narrative structure which constitutes both the posing of a question, "What is the truth?" or "Who is the murderer?" and the narration of the answer, "The truth is that X murdered Y for the following reasons ..."; in other words, the text of detective fiction manifests a doubled narrative structure.[17] Because of this doubled structure, it is particularly necessary that prolepses

[17] This point is particularly clearly made by Alain-Michel Boyer:

"In the detective novel, the coexistence of two narratives has often been observed: the narrative of the crime and the narrative of the investigation. Michel Butor, in Passing Time remarks notably ... that 'in the detective novel the narrative is composed by counter-flow or more exactly, it superimposes two temporal successions: the days of the detection which begin with the crime, and the days of the conflict which leads to it.'* It is true that every detective novel exposes two versions of the same story which arise and progress inversely one to the other; and the two versions only rejoin each other and only coincide at the very last page. But these two overlapping narratives depend on each other: being given that the crime is the condition, the sine qua non of the narrative of the investigation, the investigation is the bringing to light of the narrative of the crime, the narration of the narrative." – Alain-Michel Boyer, "L'Enigme, l'enquête et la quête de récit: la fiction policière dans Les Gommes et Le Voyeur d' Alain Robbe-Grillet," French Forum 6, 1, (1981) p. 81, my translation. *In this extract Boyer refers to Michel Butor, L'Emploi du Temps (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1957) p. 171.

and analepses are clearly defined if confusion is to be avoided. As the following example of analepsis illustrates, such temporal shifts are clearly indicated in The Blue Hammer, both by adverbial shifters and by changes in verb tense. Archer, in search of information about Mildred Mead, the model of the missing painting, interrogates Juanita Grimes, former wife of one of the murder-victims, the art-dealer, Paul Grimes:

> 'Were you close to Mildred?'
> 'As close as any other woman in town. She wasn't — she isn't a woman's woman. She's a man's woman who never married.'
> 'So I gather. Wasn't William an illegitimate son?'
> Mrs Grimes nodded. 'She had a long love affair with Felix Chantry, the man who developed the copper mine. William was his son.'
> 'How well did you know William, Mrs Grimes?'
> 'Paul and I saw quite a lot of him. He was a budding painter, too, before the army took him. Paul thought he had more potential talent than his brother Richard. He didn't live to develop it. He was murdered by an unknown hand in the summer of '43.'
> 'The same summer that Richard and his wife went to California.'
> 'The same summer,' she repeated solemnly. 'I'll never forget that summer. Mildred drove over from Tucson — she was living with a painter in Tucson then — and she drove over from there to view poor William's body in the morgue. Afterwards she came to my adobe, and it turned out she spent the night. She was strong and healthy in those days, no more than forty, but the death of her son came as a terrible shock to her.'
> (BH pp. 123-124)

In this passage it may be noted that verbs which apply to the narrative of the investigation such as "Mrs Grimes nodded" and "she repeated solemnly" are in the preterite, while verbs which apply to the narrative of the investigation that are used in direct discourse, are in the present tense, for example, "she isn't a woman's woman," and "She's

a man's woman." On the other hand, verbs in the direct discourse which apply to the narrative of the murder, are related in the preterite such as "he had more potential talent," "he was murdered," and (although there are no illustrations in this extract) verbs in the narrative of the murder are in the pluperfect tense in the indirect speech, being thereby distinguishable from the preterite. Deictic markers such as "that summer," "in Tucson then," "in those days," support the temporal shift from the present of the investigation to the past of the murder.

Conventions of temporal Duration are also closely observed in The Blue Hammer. Duration in Genette's analysis refers to the variable relation that can exist between narrative time and story time. For example, in the "Summary" narrative time is less than story time while in the "Ellipsis" narrative time is elided as story time continues. Such conventions are employed in The Blue Hammer, their use being evident in certain textual markers. For example, at the close of Chapter 30, Archer apprehends Francine Chantry's butler Rico who is on the point of heaving the remains of a skeleton, exhumed from the Chantry greenhouse, into the sea. While Chapter 30 concludes on the pier from which Rico had attempted to dispose of the skeleton, the next chapter commences in the office of Captain Mackendrick, the detective of police in charge of the recent murders. The elision of events between the time of arrest and the time of interrogation is signalled firstly by the chapter division, and secondly by the conformity of the two scenes

to expectations of succession and causality: first arrest, followed by interrogation.

Finally, with regard to narrative Frequence – which refers to the number of times an event is related in contrast with the number of times it supposedly occurs – in general, incidents which occur once in The Blue Hammer are, according to the conventional norm, narrated once. If this pattern is altered, it is with clear reason. For example, while William Mead's "death" obviously occurs only once, a variety of different accounts are offered of the incident. Since each account is offered by a different narrator – such as the Arizonan artist, Simon Lashman; the police officer in charge of the case, Sheriff Brotherton; Archer himself, and so on – and each contributes new information to the narrative, the repetition is justified as a means of refining and perfecting evidence.

Let us now consider the second expectation of the reader, "belief in at least a relative unity of self." I mentioned earlier in this chapter than Macdonald's novels frequently incorporate references to Freudian psychology. In The Blue Hammer, this is apparent in various references to the issue of split subjectivity. It is for example, possible to identify passages in the novel when Archer is invited to investigate himself as "the unknown" and "the mysterious". In the following instance, his reflections on Fred Johnson lead him to reflect on himself:

> Like other lost and foolish souls, Fred had an urge to help people, to give them psychotherapy even if it wrecked them. When he was probably the one who

> needed it most. Watch it, I said to myself, or you'll be trying to help Fred in that way. Take a look at your own life Archer.
>
> But I preferred not to. My chosen study was other men, hunted men in rented rooms, ageing boys clutching at manhood before night fell and they grew suddenly old. If you were the therapist, how could you need therapy? If you were the hunter, you couldn't be hunted. Or could you? (BH pp. 114-115).

However, if Archer raises this question of the "interior unknown", he can only afford to give thorough investigation to the question of the "exterior unknown". While Freudian thought has become sufficiently familiar to Western Culture to be superficially incorporated into popular detective fiction, its epistemological implications remain too subversive to be explored. Nevertheless, if the "interior unknown" is repressed in this text, its possibility is at least raised and the repression itself to some extent acknowledged by its very dramatization in the discourse. To use another illustration, Doris Biemeyer, the daughter of Archer's client, raises the possibility that Archer's position as analyst cannot fail to involve him in the very "corruption" or sordid confidences which he attempts to unveil:

> She narrowed her eyes and stuck out her lower lip like a stubborn child on the verge of tears. 'Nobody asked you for your advice. You are a shrink, aren't you?' She sniffed. 'I can smell the dirt on you, from people's dirty secrets.'
>
> I produced what felt from the inside like a lopsided smile. The girl was young and foolish, perhaps a little addled, by her own admission drugged. But she was young, and had clean hair. I hated to smell dirty to her (BH p. 26).

Doris Biemeyer's remarks momentarily question Archer's

authority as resolver of problems and establisher of "the truth"; she raises the possibility that he might be ambiguously both the source of order and a participant in corruption. However, this ambiguity is dismissed by a reminder of the "authority" from which the challenge stems: Doris Biemeyer is "young and foolish, perhaps a little addled, by her own admission drugged." If her mistaken identification of Archer as a "shrink" does at least raise the question of the similarity in the roles of detective and psychoanalyst, the epistemological problems which may haunt the psychoanalytic quest for hidden "truth" cannot be permitted to complicate the quest of Archer. If, in Felman's words, "The question 'Who am I?' is in a way, a complication of the question 'Who is the other?' How much other is the other? Is the other exterior or interior to the 'I'?"[18] these questions are ultimately repressed as "irrelevant". The "split-subject must be effaced by the image of the independent, autonomous hero.

Thus, if Archer's interiority to the mystery he investigates is "impossible", his exteriority to it is repeatedly confirmed. The geographical setting of the investigation for example, defines him clearly as an outsider. Although he himself is Californian — we are told that he was born in the district of Long Beach (BH p. 236) — he is unfamiliar

[18] "La question 'qui suis-je?' se complique, de la sorte, de la question, 'qui est l'autre?' Combien autre est l'autre? L'autre est-il à l'extérieur ou à l'intérieur du 'je'?" — Felman, "De Sophocle à Japrisot," p. 35, my translation.

with the locality of Santa Teresa where the mystery he investigates appears to have originated. It is for example, useful to him to elicit the assistance of two residents of the area, Betty Jo Siddon and Mrs Fay Brighton, a reporter and a librarian working for the local newspaper. Since his investigations take him to the even more distant terrain of Arizona, his exteriority to the case is emphasized as the plot thickens. His repeated references to maps and his observations about the unfamiliar geography of Arizona foreground this alienism; although, of course, his ability to move efficiently in alien surroundings is further proof of the point made earlier, that Archer is a competent reader and decoder.

Another factor which serves to emphasize Archer's exteriority to the case he investigates, is the high density of connections and relatedness existing between those characters who have been involved in the events of the case. To give some indication of this relatedness, it may be remarked for instance that Jack Biemeyer, husband of Archer's client Ruth Biemeyer, was related to the painter Richard Chantry since Biemeyer's mother was the cousin of Richard Chantry's father, Felix. Mildred Mead was mistress of both Felix Chantry and Jack Biemeyer, and the mother of William Mead. Although the latter's father is believed to be Felix Chantry, it transpires that his father is actually Jack Biemeyer. Although Richard Chantry marries Francine, it is revealed that she is actually in love with William Mead, while her husband is involved in a clandestine

homosexual affair with the art dealer and instructor, Paul Grimes; and so the connections proliferate. If, as Geoffrey Hartman argues,

> The thrill of a "thriller" is surely akin to the fear that the murderer will prove to be not an outsider but someone there all the time, someone we know only too well – perhaps a blood relation[19]

the involvements and intrigues of The Blue Hammer seem to provide precisely the network in which such a familiar character, unrecognized as criminal, might hide. However, since the reader's position with Archer as problem-solver who stands outside this network, is never called into question, he may derive the thrill of experiencing the threat of unrecognized internal danger, while at the same time being assured of his own comfortable distance from it.

It is because the exteriority of the detective and the reader is clearly distinguished from the interiority of their counterparts – the other as criminal and implied author respectively – that their roles as makers of meaning or restorers of order are clearly distinguished from the criminal and authorial roles as instigators of mysteries. As a conclusion to this discussion of the conventional detective novel, let us turn then to a consideration of the final interpretive solution, the ultimate "explosion of the truth."

[19] Hartman, "Literature High and Low," p. 221.

The Beginning as the End:
Completing the Interpretive Circle

It has been pointed out earlier in this argument that the detective novel manifests a double narrative structure, comprising the narrative of the investigation which poses the question "What is the truth?" and the narrative of the crime which provides the answer, "The truth is that ...". The arrival at the truth which concludes the narrative of the investigation is then simultaneously the discovery of the origin of the narrative of the murder. The detective or reader is seen to have moved in a circle, back to the beginning, the "primal scene", prior to which there is no more to know. This circular movement of the quest back to the "source", from which the quester can see, in retrospect, the segments of meaning taking up their places in the final "whole", is clearly evident in The Blue Hammer. Towards the close of the novel, for example, Archer remarks,

> As I followed Purvis's wagon across town into the hospital area, I felt that the thirty-two-year case was completing a long curve back to its source (BH p. 228, my emphasis).

A little later he tells Francine Chantry that he has recovered Ruth Biemeyer's stolen picture,

> ' ... I found it this morning in Johnson's attic, where it originated. Where the whole current case originated. That picture seems to be the central thing in the case... (BH p. 240, my emphasis).

The return to the ultimate "origin" takes place in the last three pages of the text when Archer, producing his own version of the oft-repeated story of William Mead's

death, reveals that Mead is in fact the murderer and Richard Chantry the victim. Then, to crown this return to origins, Jack Biemeyer names himself as the "true" father of the murderer.

In this "explosion of the truth" all shadows of mystery are suddenly illuminated, disjointed fragments of narrative fall into a coherent whole and the ghost of Richard Chantry is buried for good. If the threat of the uncanny has disturbed the reader he can once more rest assured that mysteries are explicable, ghosts can be laid, reason will inevitably triumph, and the quester's Desire can be satisfied.

However, what I hope will have begun to emerge from this investigation of the conditions of meaning governing the detective novel, is that such an illuminating denouement is only possible if certain alternatives are repressed in the course of the detective's quest. As long as boundaries are clearly drawn between the self and the other, between the detective and the criminal and so forth – as long as these are seen as "opposites", it will be possible for the question "What is the truth?" to return to the quester at the end of his quest as a completed, resolved answer. When however, boundaries become blurred, when for example, the unconscious manifests itself as the unknown of the self which intrudes as the verbal slip, the lapsus or the joke into the rational order of the conscious discourse; when the ghost manifests itself as the dead which intrudes as the uncanny into the world of the living, it

must become apparent that the conception of identities as separate, unified and homogeneous, is an illusion. Instead it must become apparent that identity – in particular the identity of the "self" – is defined, not by being opposite to "the other" in a neat rational system, but by its interplay with Otherness as a difference that is an interior and irreducible unknown. This status of the Other, not only as irreducibly different, but as situated within the self, calls for a new method of self-reflection, or to use Felman's phrase, "a new mode of reflexivity" and is one of the most productive of Lacan's "return to Freud." As Felman argues:

> ... the new Freudian (psychoanalytic) reflexivity substitutes, for all traditional binary, symmetrical conceptual oppositions – that is, substitutes for the very foundations of Western metaphysics – a new mode of interfering heterogeneity: this new reflexive mode, instituted by Freud's way of listening to the discourse of the hysteric and which Lacan will call "the inmixture of the subjects" (E 415) – divides the subjects differently, in such a way that they are neither entirely distinguished, separate from each other, nor, correlatively, entirely totalizable, but rather, interfering from within with and in one another.[20]

Now, thus far, I have attempted to demonstrate how the detective novel, in adhering to certain conventions, in delineating identities and boundaries explicitly and repressing that which does not conform to such delineation as marginal or unimportant, is able to constitute in the process of its writing, the question "What is the truth?"

[20] Felman, "The Originality of Jacques Lacan," p. 52. The reference "E 415" refers to the French publication of Lacan's Ecrits (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966).

a question which the reader will be able to resolve in the process of his interpretive reading activity. If, however, the new mode of reflexivity disrupts the concept of "the truth", or "the meaning", or "the self" as never fully accessible, if it presents the circle of the quest as never fully closing upon the "origin", what implications does this have for the reader's quest? This is the question which the next section of this chapter will investigate, using as its illustrative material The Erasers (Les Gommes) by Alain Robbe-Grillet.

DEFUSING THE EXPLOSION OF THE TRUTH: THE ERASERS BY ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET

> It concerns a precise, concrete, essential event: the death of a man. It is an event of a detective nature — in other words there is a murderer, a detective, a victim. In one sense, their roles are likewise respected: the murderer fires at the victim, the detective resolves the question, the victim dies. But the relations which bind them are not as simple once the last chapter concludes. For the book is precisely the narration of the twenty-four hours which elapse between the pistol-shot and this death, the time which the bullet has taken to travel three or four metres — twenty-four hours "in excess."
>
> — Alain Robbe-Grillet[21]

[21] "Il s'agit d'un événement précis, concret, essentiel; la mort d'un homme. C'est un événement à caractère policier — c'est-à-dire qu'il y a un assassin, un détective, une victime. En un sens, leurs rôles sont même respectés: l'assassin tire sur la victime, le détective résout la question, la victime meurt. Mais les relations qui les lient ne sont pas aussi simples qu'une fois le dernier chapitre terminé. Car le livre est justement le récit des vingt-quatre heures qui s'écoulent entre ce coup de pistolet et cette mort, le temps que la balle a mis pour parcourir trois ou quatre mètres — vingt-quatre heures "en trop." — Alain Robbe-Grillet quoted by Bruce Morrissette in "Oedipus and Existentialism: Les Gommes of Robbe-Grillet," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 1, 3 (1960) p. 45, my translation.

I have argued in the preceding section of this chapter, that the constitutive centre of the detective novel is the crime – the mysterious event which sets in motion the questioning process of which the narrative is composed. Furthermore I have argued that since the missing or mysterious component is customarily the identity of the criminal, the detective novel is commonly structured around the question, "Who committed the crime?"

In the Prologue of The Erasers both these conventions are subverted. From the outset of the narrative, there is confusion not only as to the precise nature of the crime, but also as to the identity of the victim. In part 1 of the Prologue, the reader is informed through the interior monologue of the manager of the Café des Alliés, that a crime has been committed. Wiping down tables in preparation for the day's business he remarks to himself,

> Funny little spot; this marble's no good, everything stains it. It looks like blood. Daniel Dupont last night; a stone's throw from here. Funny business: a burglar would never have gone into a lighted room on purpose, the man must have wanted to kill him. Revenge, or what? Clumsy in any case.[22]

The manager seems confident that because of the clumsiness of the intruder, the victim – Daniel Dupont – is still alive; yet his first customer of the day, Antoine, announces

[22] Alain Robbe-Grillet, The Erasers, trans. Richard Howard (London: Calder & Boyars, 1966) p. 4. All subsequent references to this text will be included in the body of the chapter using the abbreviation "E" followed by the relevant page number. References in French are taken from Les Gommes, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1953) and will be indicated by the abbreviation "G" followed by the relevant page number.

that according to the morning paper, one Albert Dupont has been murdered, " ... here, right at the end of the street!" (E p. 7). Since neither Antoine nor the manager is in possession of the newspaper, these contradictions cannot for the present be resolved.

If the reader does not initially know whether there has been a murder or who the dead man might be, in the second part of the Prologue he is introduced without further ado to the murderer: "This man's name is Garinati. ... He is the clumsy murderer of the day before who only slightly wounded Daniel Dupont" (E pp. 10-11). He is also given a detailed account, from the perspective of Garinati, of how the attempted murder failed.

Part 3 returns the reader to the bewildered manager, who reads the report in a second newspaper which contradicts both Antoine's earlier reading and the manager's own experience of the previous evening. He reads that Daniel Dupont, " ... critically wounded and taken at once to a nearby clinic, died there without regaining consciousness" (E p. 19); yet Dupont's housekeeper, telephoning from the Café des Alliés for a doctor the previous evening, had told the manager that her employer had received only a graze on the arm from a bullet.

Part 4, a scene involving the wounded Dupont, Dr Juard and an acquaintance of Dupont, the merchant Marchat, resolves the mystery of the earlier sections. Dupont is revealed to be the ninth victim of a murder-plan conducted by a politically motivated terrorist gang against an under-

ground organization of which the minister Roy-Dauzet is the conductor. Since Garinati, the appointed killer, has failed in his assassination attempt, Dupont has fled to Dr Juard's clinic whence he will be removed to safety the following evening. In order to protect Dupont from further attacks, the police and the press will be advised by the Ministry that he is dead and that the body has been removed from Juard's clinic for investigation by the central services — the Bureau of Investigation.

In part 5, Commissioner Laurent, the chief of police initially in charge of the case, is attempting, not to solve the mystery, as might be anticipated, but to determine what exactly the mystery is. Following the routine investigations of murder, he finds himself not only without clues or leads, but without the prime sign of a violation of order — the body of the victim. He is tempted to consider the possibility that Dupont committed suicide, or even more absurdly, that no crime has taken place at all. Ironically, this detective novel seems to be structuring itself less around the question, "Who committed the crime?" than around the question "What is the crime?" or "Is there any mystery to investigate at all?" To borrow Geoffrey Hartman's joke, "Instead of a whodunit, we get a whodonut, a story with a hole in it."[23]

It is likely to be with some relief that the reader comes to the closing words of the Prologue which suggest

[23] Hartman, "Literature High and Low," p. 206.

the imminent arrival of that infallible maker of meaning: the detective,

> Wallas.
> "Special agent ...." (E p. 28).

The Detective as Maker of Meaning

The reader who is expecting the introduction into the text of an experienced mentor and guide who, like Lew Archer, will provide perceptive and indubitably accurate interpretations from an authoritative perspective, is liable to be bewildered by the figure of Wallas. From the outset it is apparent that the Special Agent is not as well-informed as the reader, for he appears to believe that " ... Daniel Dupont was killed yesterday by a bullet in the chest. For the time being Wallas does not know more than that" (E p. 32). In addition, he is remarkably inexperienced and appears to have no special claim to investigatory expertise:

> Wallas has worked for the Bureau of Investigation only a short time, before that he was in another branch of the Ministry of the Interior, and it is an accident that he happens to have this job (E p. 44).

This experience, furthermore, seems clearly evident to those he interrogates. For example, Dupont's old housekeeper remarks to herself,

> This gentleman has a nicer look about him than the other two who came last night, with their red faces and their big boots. ... This one looks less shrewd — and keeps getting mixed up in a lot of nonsense before coming to the point — but certainly he is better brought up (E p. 68).

Not only has Wallas been hired on probation (E p. 151), but his forehead lacks "one square centimetre of the fifty square centimetres of frontal surface" required by a detective investigator (E p. 133), and his watch has stopped.

Perhaps one of the most radical differences between Wallas and Archer is the former's indulgence in the self-reflection which the latter does not permit himself. Wallas appears to have given consideration to his own motives for undertaking the investigatory, interpretive quest. For example, early in his investigation we are informed that,

> Wallas likes walking. In the cold, early winter air he likes walking straight ahead through this unknown city. He looks around, he listens, he smells the air; this perpetually renewed contact affords him a subtle impression of continuity; he walks on and gradually unrolls the uninterrupted ribbon of his own passage, not a series of irrational, unrelated images, but a smooth band where each element immediately takes its place in the web, even the most fortuitous, even those that might at first seem absurd or threatening or anachronistic or deceptive; they all fall into place in good order, one beside the other, and the ribbon extends without flaw or excess, in time with the regular speed of his footsteps. ... It is of his own free will that he is walking towards an inevitable and perfect future. In the past, he has too frequently let himself be caught in the circles of doubt and impotence, now he is walking; he has recovered his continuity here (E pp. 36-27).

Wallas's questing activity is presented in this passage as a means of restoring his faith in "order". "Continuity" is presented not as natural, real or inherent to his experience, as it might appear to be to Lew Archer's, but as a "subtle impression" which enables him to escape the threat of "irrational unrelated images," or the "absurd or threatening or anachronistic or deceptive." Now since it has

been argued that the detective is the textual paradigm of the reader, it seems that the reader, following Wallas's lead, is being invited to question his own activity of questing through the novel. Is his reading quest, like Wallas's, an attempt to reassure himself of the possibility of finding order, continuity and meaning in the world?

As Wallas's quest progresses it becomes increasingly apparent that any sense of continuity or linear progression in his investigation has been a momentary illusion. If the detective and the reader, in their capacity as interpreters, are the unveilers, or makers, of meaning, they are liable to find this role ironically subverted in the course of this investigation. For instead of pursuing "meaning" along the metonymic path of its flight, they seem fated to find themselves at every turn, confronted with yet another Pandora's box of excess meaning or narrative possibilities whose multidirectional flight defies pursuit and mocks any linear progression of interpretation. Let us examine how the text operates to produce this effect.

Writing and Erasing Excess Meaning

Earlier in this chapter, I drew upon Susan Suleiman's suggestions of some readerly expectations governing the intelligibility of literary texts — in brief, the principles of noncontradiction, of temporal succession and causality; a belief in the solidity of the phenomenal world and a belief in the unity of the self. Once again, attributing authority to these principles on the assumption

that they constitute among the most elementary principles of rational thought, I propose to use them as an index against which to assess the subversiveness of various textual strategies used in The Erasers.

Firstly, examples of the subversion of the principle of noncontradiction are numerous in The Erasers. Descriptions of objects may, for example, be given which appear to conform to the convention of "realism" but which are subsequently contradicted by alternative descriptions. This occurrence can be demonstrated by the example of the "metamorphosing" cube of lava on the desk of Daniel Dupont. On its first appearance in the text, the cube of lava seems to serve no more significant narrative function than to contribute to the "reality effects" of the room that is being described from the perspective of Garinati prior to his attempted murder of Dupont:

> A kind of cube, but slightly misshapen, a shiny block of grey lava, with its faces polished as though by wear, the edges softened, compact, apparently hard, heavy as gold, looking about as big around as a fist; a paperweight? It is the only trinket in the room (E p. 15).

In its second appearance, the cube is attributed different properties; its edges, previously described as "softened" and "compact" are now described as "sharp," so that, effectively, it is transformed into a potential murder-weapon. This description forms part of the reconstruction and interpretation of events that took place on the night of Monday, 26 October, at the Dupont home, compiled by an enthusiastic young police officer who investigates the case prior to

the arrival of Wallas:

> Jean picks up the first thing he finds within his reach: the heavy paperweight with sharp edges. He brandishes it, ready to strike (E p. 166).

In the third description, presented from the perspective of Wallas, the cube of lava which now has "deadly corners" as well as "sharp edges" seems to symbolize the threat of imminent violence:

> The white sheet on which the professor had as yet written only four words has disappeared, filed away in a folder or in some drawer. The cube of vitrified stone, with its sharp edges and deadly corners, is lying harmlessly between the inkwell and the memo pad (E p. 201).

As I have argued earlier, contradictory information which places in question the identity of a person or an object or an event, is treated in the conventional detective novel as a sign of misunderstanding, ignorance or deception. The authority of the detective as comprehending, well-informed pursuer of the truth is present to confirm the falsity of such contradiction. In The Erasers the absence of any single, authoritative narrative perspective constitutes the withdrawal of a yard-stick whereby the "true" may be distinguished from the "false". Just as all the narrative perspectives offered above – the positions of Garinati, the police officer and Wallas – are credible, so each of the descriptions of the cube of lava offered from these perspectives constitutes a credible narrative possibility. Yet how is the reader who expects to arrive at the "meaning of the text" to determine which of these

possibilities he should accept as "true" and which he should discard as "false"? Instead he may find himself asking whether the notions "true" and "false" are even possible.

A second example of overt contradiction in The Erasers can be found in the notorious description of the tomato-quarter:

> A quarter of tomato that is quite faultless, cut up by the machine into a perfectly symmetrical fruit.
> The peripheral flesh, compact, homogeneous, and a splendid chemical red, is of an even thickness between a strip of gleaming skin and the hollow where the yellow, graduated seeds appear in a row, kept in place by a thin layer of greenish jelly along a swelling of the heart. This heart, of a slightly grainy, faint pink, begins – toward the inner hollow – with a cluster of white veins, one of which extends towards the seeds – somewhat uncertainly.
> Above, a scarcely perceptible accident has occurred: a corner of the skin, stripped back from the flesh for a fraction of an inch, is slightly raised
> (E pp. 129-130)

Although at first this quarter of tomato is described as "quite faultless," and "a perfectly symmetrical fruit," the minute qualifications and adjustments that follow this initial statement define the tomato as quite Other than it had initially appeared to be. It is as if linguistic discourse, in attempting to represent the concept of perfection, must either repress details – such as the evidence of an accident – which by their exclusion contribute to the defining of perfection – or must, by the very inclusion of all details, eventually write itself into meaningless contradiction. In other words, a description of perfection seems paradoxically to depend on a process of omission or exclusion or repression. The reader, confronted with

the description of the tomato-quarter quoted above may, like Wallas, experience the urge to digress from his original quest to search for a device, an "eraser," with which to eliminate such puzzling excesses of signification.

Moving next to the question of the treatment of Time in The Erasers: the conventions of temporal succession and causality are repeatedly subverted in this text. One of the initial indications of such subversion is the substitution of the customary narrative preterite tense with the present tense. This peculiarity is particularly noticeable in the original text since in French the traditional narrative tense is the passé simple – a specifically literary verb tense indicating temporal distance or the absence of any relation between the time of the events of the narrative and the time of their narration.[24] The use of the present tense seems to suggest on the contrary, that the events of The Erasers have by no means begun and concluded in the past with no relation to the present: they are not events related retrospectively, but are in the process of unfolding through the action of the reader's reading.

[24] "The passé simple expresses an act which has taken place in the past and which is considered from its beginning to its conclusion, but without any relation with the present. It corresponds to the perfect past, but the latter has a relation to the present."

"Le passé simple exprime un fait qui a eu lieu dans le passé, et qui est considéré de son début jusqu'à sa fin, mais sans aucun rapport avec le present. Il correspond au passé composé mais celui-ci a un rapport avec le présent." – Jacqueline Ollivier, Grammaire francaise, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) p. 370, my translation.

Another effect which this use of the present tense produces is described by Christine Brooke-Rose in her work A Rhetoric of the Unreal. She points out:

> Writers have always changed the narrative order of the events they recount, from the epic beginning in medias res to the present day, but the transitions are clearly marked, if not by narrator comment, at least by adverbial shifters and by tense (e.g., the pluperfect for the analepsis, the future for the prolepsis).
>
> The use of the present tense throughout, first by Dujardin, then by Gertrude Stein, then by Joyce in Finnegans Wake, and later by Robbe-Grillet and others, clearly flattens out all such clear markings in a perpetual present. ... Robbe-Grillet exploits this fusion of time in his novels by using the present whatever the order of events, so that ... we never quite know when (and whether) something is occurring, or recurring (or being recalled), the only time markers being contingent ones, such as slight differences in the retelling, in the position of objects, or in the climate ... . Thus it is never clear whether events are lived or re-lived, an ambiguity used by these novelists to challenge the traditional notion of representation in fiction, where nothing is 'lived' except by the author in his writing experience and the reader in his reading experience.[25]

In addition to this use of the present tense, an overt warning in the third paragraph of the Prologue alerts the reader to the unusual treatment to be given to time:

> Unfortunately time will soon no longer be master. Wrapped in their aura of doubt and error, this day's events, however insignificant they may be, will in a few seconds begin their task, gradually encroaching upon their ideal order, cunningly introducing an occasional inversion, a discrepancy, a confusion, a warp, in order to accomplish their work: a day in early winter without plan, without direction, incomprehensible and monstrous (E p. 3).

As this paragraph predicts, events in this text unfold regardless of expectations about linear order or sequence.

[25] C. Brooke-Rose, pp. 313-314.

Expectations of temporal patterns such as the convention that the past has preceded the present which in turn will be succeeded by that which is in the future, or the succession of cause by effect, are thwarted. Now the question which arises from such irregularities is this: how does temporal subversion operate to produce "excess meaning"? Gérard Genette, in his article "Vertige fixé" offers a useful discussion of this issue. He argues as follows:

> Roman Jakobson has shown that the conception of literature, like all linguistic performance (parole) can be named according to two essential and complementary functions: the selection of similarities and the combination of contiguities. The first operation is located at that pole of language which rhetoric names metaphor (the transfer of sense by analogy), the second at the pole of metonymy (the transfer of sense by contiguity). Poetic art relies essentially on the play of metaphor (these are the Baudelairian or symbolist 'correspondences'), whereas narrative art, and therefore especially the art of novel-writing relies on metonymic play, the description and narration developing along the order of spatial and temporal contiguities. If one adopts this convenient classification, it is observable that Robbe-Grillet's skill lies in organizing in the metonymic order of narrative, material which is of a metaphorical nature, since it results from analogies between different elements, or from transformations of identical elements. After any given scene in a novel by Robbe-Grillet, the reader is entitled to expect – according to the traditional order of narrative – another scene that is contiguous either in space or in time. What Robbe-Grillet offers him instead is the same scene, slightly modified, or another analogous scene. In other words, he spreads out horizontally (syntagmatically) in spatio-temporal continuity, the vertical (paradigmatic) relationships which connect the many variations on a theme; he organizes in sequential order, the alternatives of a choice; he transposes coincidence into concatenation like an aphasic who declines a noun or conjugates a verb believing that he constructs a sentence.[26]

[26] "Roman Jakobson a montré que l'imagination littéraire, comme toute parole, fait appel à deux fonctions essentielles et complémentaires: la sélection d'unités similaires, et la combinaison d'unités contiguës. La première opération se situe à ce pôle du

In order to execute this strategy described by Genette, Robbe-Grillet arrests the temporal continuum within the "world" of the novel, thereby producing a rupture or breach in the narrative network. The various narrative possibilities usually repressed by the choices which the temporal continuum of traditional narrative demands, are thus permitted to manifest themselves sequentially. In the second section of the Prologue, the potential effect of such a breach is suggested. The narrated monologue in which Garinati's attempted murder is being described is disrupted by the following interpolation:

> Suddenly the limpid water grows cloudy. In this setting determined by law, without an inch of land to the right or left, without a second's hesitation, without resting, without looking back, the actor suddenly stops, in the middle of a phrase.....He knows it by

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langage que la rhétorique appelle métaphore (transfer de sens par analogie), la seconde au pôle de la métonymie (transfert de sens par contiguïté). L'art de la poésie repose essentiellement sur le jeu de la métaphore (ce sont les "correspondances" baudelairiennes et symbolistes), l'art du récit, et donc spécialement l'art du roman, repose sur le jeu des métonymies, la description et la narration suivant l'ordre des contiguïtés spatiales et temporelles. Si l'on adopte cette classification commode, on observe que l'art de Robbe-Grillet consiste à disposer dans l'ordre métonymique de la narration et de la description romanesques un matériel de nature métaphorique, puisque résultant d'analogies entre éléments différents ou de transformations d'éléments identiques. Après une scène d'un roman de Robbe-Grillet, le lecteur attend légitimement, selon l'ordre classique du récit, une autre scène contiguë dans le temps ou l'espace; ce que lui offre Robbe-Grillet, c'est la même scène légèrement modifiée, ou une autre scène analogue. Autrement dit, il étale horizontalement, dans la continuité spatio-temporelle, la relation verticale qui unit les diverses variantes d'un thème, il dispose en série les termes d'un choix, il transpose une concurrence en concaténation, comme un aphasique qui déclinerait un nom, ou conjuguerait un verbe, en croyant construire une phrase."—Gerard Genette, "Vertige fixé," Figures, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966) pp. 84-85.

> heart, this role he plays evening; but today he refuses to go any farther. Around him the other characters freeze, arm raised or leg half bent. The measure begun by the musicians goes on and on.....He would have to do something now, speak any words at all, words that would not belong to the libretto....(E pp. 13-14).

What had seemed the immediacy of a realistically narrated event, is suddenly distanced. Garinati's actions are no longer the "real" actions of an assassin, but the sequence of moves which has been planned by an antecedent authority. Within the context of the story, this authority could be identified as Bonaventure, the leader of the terrorist gang, but the theatrical analogy, the focus of attention on role-playing, on the actor's articulation of a fictional discourse, foregrounds Garinati's status as a character in a fictional text. The hesitation of such a character implies a break or rupture in the metonymic chain of the narrative discourse and a consequent gap in the temporal continuum of the fictional world. A multitude of alternative possibilities threatens to flood into this gap: "He would have to do something now, speak any words at all, words that would not belong to the libretto...." Although in the Prologue this hesitation in the continuum of time is only threatened — the actor does resume his act, "the phrase begun concludes in the prescribed form, the arm falls back, the leg completes its stride (E p. 14) — in Chapter One, the hesitation is sustained. Its effects, the transposition of the paradigmatic choices onto the syntagmatic axis, are realized. It is worthwhile examining this hesitation closely.

The textual index which signals the arrest of the temporal continuum and suggests that the investigation of the detective, Wallas, takes place in a temporal vacuum, is the stopped watch introduced in the second paragraph of Chapter One:

> He [Wallas] glances mechanically at his watch and notices that it has not started again; it stopped last night at seven-thirty, which has not made things easier for this trip or for anything else. It stops every once in a while, he does not really know why – sometimes after a shock, not always – and then starts again afterwards, all by itself, with no more reason. Apparently there is nothing broken inside, it can also run for several weeks at a stretch. It is unpredictable, which is rather annoying at first, but you can get used to it (E p. 31).

Initially, this stopped watch might appear to be no more than one of the details which cast doubt on the degree of efficiency that might be expected of Wallas as Special Agent. As the narrative progresses, however, it becomes apparent that this is part of a textual strategy which subverts the treatment of time as a continuum. As the following paragraph suggests, for example, time is not necessarily experienced as "naturally" or "inherently" continuous. Since the notion of continuity is a social and therefore literary convention, it is possible – by waiving the convention – to conceive of a variation between corporate and individual experiences of time:

> He [Wallas] walks on. Around him life has not yet begun. Just now, on the parkway, he has passed the first wave of workmen riding towards the harbour, but since then he has not met anyone else: the employees, the businessmen, the mothers, the children on their way to school, are silent inside the closed houses. The bicycles have vanished and the day which they

> had inaugurated has retreated behind a few gestures, like a sleeper who has just stretched out his arm to turn off the alarm clock and grants himself a few minutes' reprieve before opening his eyes for good. In a second the eyelids will rise, the city emerging from its false sleep will catch up at once with the rhythm of the harbour and, this dissonance resolved, it will again be the same time for everyone.
>
> The only pedestrian, Wallas advances through this fragile interval (E p. 35).

Just as, on this occasion, social, conventional time stops while the individual advances in the temporal vacuum, so it is possible to infer that the entire investigatory quest takes place in a temporal "excess".[27] This inference is supported by the repetition of the image of Wallas's watch in juxtaposition with the image of the stopped clock in the Dupont home:

> Wallas looks at his watch: it still shows seven-thirty. In Dupont's bedroom, the bronze clock on the mantelpiece, between the empty candlesticks, had also stopped (E pp. 72-73).

It is also supported by the reinstatement of time as a continuum at the close of the last chapter, after Wallas has "concluded" his investigation and has "discovered" the murderer of Dupont:

> Wallas looks at his watch; it shows seven thirty-five. Then he remembers that it had stopped at seven-thirty. He raises it to his ear and hears the faint ticking. It must be the detonation that has started it going again

[27] Bruce Morrissette corroborates this view with the remark, "In a sense, the entire twenty-four hours of the main action is "outside of time ("vingt-quatre heures 'en trop'"), as objectified or reinforced by the stopping of Wallas' watch from the moment of Garinati's shot to the instant of Dupont's death when Wallas fires, returning the situation substantially to that which seemed to prevail the night before." — "Oedipus and Existentialism," p. 53-54.

> — or else the shock, if he bumped it when he threw himself to the floor (E p. 209).

In this "world" where time has stopped, the narrative possibilities repressed by the customary choices of traditional narrative are permitted to manifest themselves, for there is no longer any need to preserve the convention of time as a continuum composed of consecutive events. Thus, for example, the text offers at least six alternative causes which might have produced the death of Dupont: he might have committed suicide (E p. 51; 113-114; 138-139); he might have been murdered for his money by his wife (E p. 55); he might have been killed by the housekeeper Madame Smite (E p. 55), or by Dr Juard (E p. 69) or by both in collusion (E p. 55); he might have been murdered by his illegitimate son (E pp. 162-167); he might have escaped the first attempt on his life by an underground political group (E pp. 15-16) in which case he might eventually be killed by Wallas himself (E pp. 206-209).

Now, it might not be unusual for an investigator to speculate on the numerous possible sequences which his case might have followed, if these are clearly defined as speculations. In The Blue Hammer it may occur to Archer for example, that Francine Chantry and her butler, Rico are murderers:

> A black thought bit at the edge of my mind and gradually eclipsed it. The people in the greenhouse had dug a grave and now they were filling it in. It didn't seem quite possible. But if it was, then it was possible that Betty Siddon's body was under the dirt (BH p. 159, my emphasis).

However, the speculative nature of this observation is clearly indicated by the reference to "possibility" rather than "fact" and to "thought" rather than "knowledge". When in The Erasers, Commissioner Laurent relinquishes the case of the Dupont "murder" to Wallas he offers the latter his own speculations about the crime which in this context are not likely to be disconcerting to the reader. When, however, such possibilities are subsequently explored as if they were indeed "real", the reader, with no orienting narrative authority to assist him is liable to find that the boundaries between the "real" and the "speculative" are confusingly blurred. To illustrate this effect, I shall examine extracts from two of the three versions of Daniel Dupont's suicide: that which occurs on pages 113-114 and that which occurs on page 140. Since comments about the narrative discourse in these extracts may lose credibility when applied to translations, I shall refer to the original French text using the English translation in accompaniment.

One.

> Dupont fait quelques pas sur la moquette vert d'eau, qui étouffe les bruits. Il n'y a guère de place pour marcher dans le petit bureau. De tous les côtés les livres le cernent: droit, législation sociale, économie politique....; dans le bas à gauche, au bout du grand rayonnage, s'alignent les quelques volumes qu'il a lui-même ajoutés à la série. Peu de chose. Il y avait deux ou trois idées malgré tout. Qui les a comprises? Tant pis pour eux (G pp. 141-142).

Two.

> Il se lève et fait quelques pas sur la moquette vert d'eau, qui étouffe les bruits. Il n'y a guère de place pour marcher dans le petit bureau. De tous les côtés les livres le cernent: droit, législation sociale, économie politique....; dans le bas à gauche, au bout

> du grand rayonnage, s'alignent les quelques volumes qu'il a lui-même ajoutés à la série. Peu de chose. Il y avait deux ou trois idées malgré tout. Qui les a comprises? Tant pis pour eux; ce n'est pas une raison pour se tuer de désespoir! (G p. 173).

One.

> Dupont takes a few steps on the water-green carpet that muffles every noise. There is not much room to walk in the little study. Books hem him in on all sides: law, social legislation, political economy.... Down below, to the left, at the end of the long shelves, stands the row of books he himself has added to the series. Not much. There were two or three ideas there, even so. Who has understood them? Too bad for them (E p. 113).

Two.

> He stands up and takes a few steps on the water-green carpet that muffles every sound. There is scarcely any room to walk in the little study. On every side books surround him: law, social legislation, political economy .... Down below, to the left, at the end of the long shelves, stands the row of books he himself has added to the series. Not much. There were two or three ideas nevertheless. Who has understood them? Too bad for them; that's no reason to kill oneself in despair! (E p. 140).

Both the descriptions from which these extracts are taken are introduced into the text without any anchorage in a narrative perspective other than that of Dupont. Textual markers such as the pronouns "Il se lève" ("He stands up"), "il a lui-même ajoutés" ("he himself has added"), deictics "de tous les côtés" ("on all sides"), "à gauche" ("to the left), and phrases recorded in free indirect speech, "Qui les a comprises?" (Who has understood them?") and "Tant pis pour eux" ("Too bad for them"), lead the reader to believe that he is witnessing the actions and thoughts of Dupont. In each case however, a sudden change in perspective re-contextualizes the passage as the interpretation of the suicide of Dupont offered first by Commissioner Laurent

and then by Wallas. Once again it is not unusual in traditional detective fiction to encounter several versions of the same story: we are, as already remarked, given repeated accounts of William Mead's "death" in The Blue Hammer. Such repetitions are justified by variations in the content of the narrations, variations which are relevant to the detective's quest. Repeated information might imply corroboration; differing information might imply deception, and so on. In the examples cited above, however, the information offered by the two versions is almost exactly repeated. Those differences which do arise take the form of paradigmatic alternatives, for example, "sound" or "noise"; "not much" or "scarcely any"; "On every side," or "on all sides"; "even so" or "nevertheless," and so on. It is as if the narrative possibilities or paradigmatic alternatives of describing the scene are being explored. Since there is no compulsion to preserve time as a continuum, the need to select and retain certain narrative possibilities and to reject or repress others no longer applies. The choices available to the writer are made accessible to the reader. The convention that the writer takes the role of problem-maker who formulates the mystery and authorizes the course of its solution, while the reader takes the role of problem-solver who follows the detective in identifying the mystery and its decipherment, is subverted. In other words, the boundary between the reader and the writer, like other boundaries already examined, becomes blurred. It becomes apparent that the writer, in order

to write, must first be a reader, an interpreter of, and selector from numerous narrative choices, while the reader, on the other hand, in the process of interpreting, is himself rewriting the story he reads. This is an issue to which I shall be giving closer attention shortly. For the present let us return to the third norm of textual intelligibility: just as the boundaries between "the true" and "the false" are blurred by the subversion of the principle of noncontradiction, or the boundaries between "reality" and "possibility" are blurred by the subversion of temporal conventions, so the boundaries between "the real" and "the representational" or "fictional" are blurred by the subversion of the belief in the solidity of the phenomenal world. In the following description for example, the distinction between the "real" as substantial origin and the "representational" as imaginary, ephemeral derivation, is blurred:

> Usually this landscape has little relief and looks rather unattractive, but this morning the greyish yellow sky of snowy days gives it unaccustomed dimensions. Certain outlines are emphasized, others are blurred; here and there distances open out, unsuspected masses appear; the whole is organized into a series of planes silhouetted against one another, so that the depth, suddenly illuminated, seems to lose its natural look — and perhaps its reality — as if this over-exactitude were possible only in a painting (E p. 79).

With the progression of this description, a landscape which initially seems to be identified as "the real", "the solid", comes to appear more and more fictional and ephemeral. The very process of describing the world as "real" or "solid"

seems to foreground the nature of this "reality" as a product of symbolic conventions such as the blurring or emphasis of outlines, or the organisation into planes. In other words the medium of representation, language, manifests itself as part of the "solidity", the "reality" which it seeks to describe; as Stephen Heath expresses it:

> Instead of effacing itself before a 'Reality' projected as its precedent, language ... is grasped as specific locus of the articulation of the real, of its real-ization.[28]

We now come to Suleiman's fourth and final norm of textual intelligibility, "the belief in at least a relative unity of self." If in The Blue Hammer the issue of "split-subjectivity" is treated as irrelevant to the chief concerns of the text, in The Erasers, the possibilities of its relevance are explored. How is this exploration executed?

In the comparison between Wallas and the figure of the conventional detective embodied by Lew Archer, a variety of differences has already been observed. One marked similarity however, is that both detectives are outsiders who arrive in cities that are unfamiliar to them, to investigate crimes committed prior to their arrivals. As professionals, each may be supposed to conduct his investigation from an exterior locus of authority. While in Archer's case, his position as exterior to the crime becomes more clearly defined with the progression of his investigation (vide p.88 of this chapter), Wallas's position becomes increasingly

[28] Heath, p. 24

ambiguous. As his investigations proceed, he encounters with alarming frequency, evidence that his position in relation to the mystery is not exterior but interior. The first suggestion of this interiority takes the form of a joke made by Commissioner Laurent during his conversation with Wallas to whom he is relinquishing the Dupont file. Referring to the Café des Alliés, Wallas asks:

> "... Suppose the murderer had slept there last night, what would you know about it?"
> "The landlord would have registered him and reported to me, as he'll do for you – he has until noon."
> "And if he doesn't?" Wallas asks.
> "Well, in that case, we would have to admire your perspicacity in having found the only clandestine rooming house in the town so quickly. It would even be bad for you in the long run; you'd be the first serious suspect I've found: recently arrived in town, living twenty yards from the scene of the crime, and completely unknown to the police!"
> "But I only arrived last night, at eleven!" Wallas protests.
> "If you weren't registered, what proof would there be?"
> "At the time the crime was committed, I was a hundred kilometres from here; that can be verified."
> "Of course! Don't good murderers always have an alibi?" (E p. 57).

If initially this joke seems marginal in relation to the more serious concerns of the investigation, it gradually manifests itself to be that Other, that "non-sense" or triviality which is repressed only to return again with greater subversive force. It becomes apparent for example, that Wallas's 7.65 millimetre automatic revolver which has one bullet missing from its chamber is both identical to the weapon used to kill Daniel Dupont, and to the weapon which Dupont owned himself. Furthermore, a little later

in the investigation, a potential witness, Madame Bax, who occupies an apartment overlooking Dupont's house, when questioned by Wallas, declares that she has seen a man in a light raincoat loitering in front of the house on the evening of Monday 26 October, pursued by a shouting drunkard. When the drunk who haunts the Café des Alliés corroborates this evidence with the claim that he himself pursued none other than Wallas the night before, the latter, in spite of his claim to have arrived in the city after the murder, once again is confronted with the suggestion that he is implicated in the crime. Since the drunk claims to have pursued "Wallas" to a post-office in the Rue de Jonas (E p. 97), Wallas himself follows this lead, only to be identified at the post-office without hesitation, as the regular client, Monsieur André WS (E p. 135).

Now the possibility that the detective might himself prove to be the murderer is not in itself unprecedented in detective fiction — Agatha Christie's The Murder of Roger Ackroyd being perhaps one of the best known examples of this artifice.[29] What is more subversive about this possibility in The Erasers is that, if the detective is indeed the murderer, he has no knowledge of his crime. In other words, he is to discover that the unknown, the criminal, is itself a part of — or to use Lacan's phrase, an "inmixing of" — that which is known: the self as detec-

[29] This issue is explored by Felman in her discussion of Oedipus Rex by Sophocles and Trap for Cinderella (Piège pour Cendrillon) by Sébastien Japrisot in "De Sophocle à Japrisot," p. 32.

tive. This condition of misrecognition in Wallas is foregrounded by the references to the Oedipal myth which are woven into the text as part of the excess of meaning which he fails to interpret. These references are worth some consideration.

Most of the Oedipal "clues" impinge on Wallas's consciousness as strange, but untranslatable signs which attract his attention during his wanderings on his quest through the city. He repeatedly observes, for example, a particular pattern in the net-curtaining of various homes:

> At one ground-floor window, the curtains are decorated with a mass-produced allegorical subject: shepherds finding an abandoned child, or something of the kind (E p. 35).

In addition to this motif which is repeated several times (E pp. 84-85; p. 176), there are references to a sculpture named "The Chariot of State" the name of whose sculptor "V. Daulis" can be read as an anagram of "Laius" father of Oedipus.[30] This sculpture is described as,

> ... a bronze group representing a Greek chariot drawn by two horses, in which are standing several individuals, probably symbolic, whose unnatural positions are out of harmony with the presumed rapidity of their equipage (E p. 45)

a description which evokes the fracas between Oedipus and the unidentified traveller — later believed to be his father Laius — at "a place where three roads meet."

[30] I owe this observation to Bruce Morrissette in "Oedipus and Existentialism." p. 56.

Other Oedipal signs are the references to the ruins of the city of Thebes (E pp. 104; 143); to the statuette of a blind old man led by a child (E pp. 177-178); to Wallas's numb, and later, painful, swollen feet (E pp. 124; 185); to the paradox of double identity in the argument of whether a line can be both straight and oblique (E pp. 191-193); and perhaps the most oft-repeated references, the riddles produced by the drunk in the Café des Alliés (E pp. 8; 94; 192-193 and 217).

If Wallas does not seem able to fit these signs into a coherent pattern of meaning, the reader who is given the advantage of the overt clue in the epigraph taken from Sophocles's Oedipus Rex – "Time that sees all has found you out against your will"[31] – may recognize these apparently superfluous signs as various segments of the Oedipal myth, and may observe the parallels between Oedipus's quest and that of Wallas. To explicate each of these parallels would seem unnecessary for this discussion. I shall consider only one of the most striking – the riddles of the drunk – and refer my reader to Morrissette's thorough exploration of this issue, for further information.[32]

[31] As Morrissette points out, this is a slight variation of the Sophoclean text which, in its English translation reads,

"Time sees all; and now he has found you, when you least expected it;" – King Oedipus in The Theban Plays, trans. E.F. Watling (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1947 rpt 1974) p. 59.

[32] See "Oedipus and Existentialism," pp. 54-63. My own comments on this theme reflect my indebtedness to this article.

The drunk in the Café des Alliés repeatedly confronts Wallas with riddles, one of which mirrors, not only the riddle of the Sphinx,[33] and the structure of the Oedipal tragedy, but also echoes the pattern of Wallas's own quest:

> "What animal is parricide in the morning, incestuous at noon, and blind at night?"
> At the bar the discussion has become a general one, but the five men are all talking at once and Wallas can hear only snatches of their remarks.
> "Well," the drunk insists, "can't you guess? It's not so hard: parricide in the morning, blind at noon .... No .... blind in the morning, incestuous at noon, parricide at night. Well? What animal is it?"
> (E pp. 192-193).

If Wallas is at a loss, the reader may recognize the irony of the riddle: firstly, it has already been remarked that Wallas, at the start of his quest on the morning of Tuesday 27 October, is "blind" to the possibility that Dupont is not dead – has not been killed "by a bullet in the chest" (E p. 32) – a possibility which has been made accessible to the reader through the Prologue. Secondly, in the course of Wallas's wanderings through the unfamiliar city, it has been suggested that he has never known his own father, that he has visited the city as a child with his mother, but that they had failed to rendezvous with his father (E p. 197). Since Dupont has been recorded in a police report has having an illegitimate son (E p. 164) and later a young wife Evelyn, whom Wallas interviews (E pp. 147-154),

[33] "The Sphinx now asked what animal walked on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening." – "Sphinx," Oxford Companion to English Literature, 1978 ed.

the implication is that Dupont might well be Wallas's father, and, furthermore, that Wallas, sensing in Evelyn – perhaps his stepmother – an erotic fascination, implicitly performs the action of "incest at noon." Finally, he shoots Dupont on the evening of Tuesday 26 October, thereby becoming "parricide at night."

Although these implications that Dupont might be Wallas's father, or that Evelyn might be his stepmother, are never overtly confirmed by the text, what is more important is the possibility that such information might exist beyond Wallas's conscious knowledge, that instead of standing outside or comprehending the solution to his investigation, he can come to find that the solution stands outside or comprehends him. In other words, what The Erasers reveals is, that the interpretive consciousness, since it can never be fully present to itself, can never be fully aware of its own position in relation to the problem it interprets. In Felman's words, "That which by definition the interpretive intelligence itself always misrecognizes is its proper place in relation to the empty slot of the enigma."[34] For what Wallas's quest ultimately reveals to him is that he both is, and is not, whom he thought he was at the start of his quest; he both controls and does not control the meaning which he produces in the course of his investigation.

[34] "Ce que par définition l'intelligence même de l'interprète toujours méconnaît, c'est sa propre place par rapport à la case vide de l'énigme." – Felman, "De Sophocle à Japrisot," p. 35, my translation.

Let us now consider closely the events and implications of the revelatory scene, the "final explosion of the truth" in The Erasers.

Arresting the Play of Difference or Repressing the Other: the Detective as Murderer, the Reader as Writer

On Tuesday night, 27 October at 7.30, Wallas's quest ends as follows: he has returned to the deserted Dupont home in his vain search for some clue that might help him to begin to solve this mystery, to arrest this play of differences which seems to proliferate with each step of his investigation. While he is inspecting Dupont's study, he hears a car stop outside and somebody enter the house. The reader from his privileged position outside the text knows that this "intruder" is Dupont himself who, on escaping the city, has come to fetch a file of papers which his acquaintance Marchat failed to retrieve for him. The reader is also aware that the revolver which Dupont takes from the drawer of the night-table in his own room, is jammed. Thus, when Dupont, entering his study, finds an intruder – Wallas – waiting in the dark where the night before the original intruder, Garinati, had lain in wait, he attempts to fire at the intruder, although his jammed revolver does not respond. Wallas, flinging himself to the floor, fires in self-defence only to discover afterwards that he has killed the man whose murder he thought he was investigating. In playing the role of detective or interpreter, he finds that he simultaneously plays the role

of murderer or instigator of the crime, the very failure in meaning that he sought to resolve. In his Desire to fill the lack of meaning, he finds himself to be the victim of that Desire.

Thus, the blurring of the boundaries between "true" and "false", "real" and "representational" and so forth, is repeated in the ironic discovery of the detective as murderer. In this blurring of boundaries, "meaning" becomes suspended yet again in the play of difference which is no longer repressed by the order of binary oppositions. No longer can the reader's quest be formulated as the question "What does the text mean?" or "What is the missing piece of the jigsaw?" for before any "jigsaw" or "totality of meaning" can be conceived from which such a piece might be missing, it is necessary to repress the difference or hide the excess pieces of puzzle, whose absence will give definition or a sense of totality to that which is present. In other words, before the reader can determine what the text might mean, he has first to discover the conditions which make meaning possible at all: how the text can come to mean.

While in the traditional detective novel this repression of differences has already been performed in the narrative choices made by the implied author, in The Erasers, such repression has only been partially executed. Sufficient choices have been made by the writer, the problem-maker, for the reader, the problem-solver, to recognize certain patterns of "meaning" in the text before him. In

other words, certain choices must be made for the reader to expect the text of The Erasers to conform to the conventions of detective fiction. Only when his quest begins does he discover that such expectations are being invited only to be subverted.

If the detective finds himself lured into the trap of his own suspicion, if he fails to recognize the Desire of the Other, the Desire to arrest the play of difference and "make meaning", the reader too is doomed to be "caught" in this trap. Like Wallas, he is confronted with the "excess meaning", the plethora of paradigmatic alternatives which have been permitted to manifest themselves on the syntagmatic axis. Like Wallas he is to discover that in attempting to resolve the failure of meaning, the mystery of the text, he finds himself repeating the "crime" – the repression or "arrest" or even "murder" of the play of difference – which he thought himself to be investigating. Just as the detective is to discover that he is the murderer, so the reader is to discover that he is the writer. In making meaning of the text, in becoming "no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text,"[35] the reader rewrites it, silencing or repressing contradictions and differences in order to give definition to the narrative choices he privileges. In this discovery that his role as "reader" involves a participation in the "Otherness" of the role of writer, the reader is effectively encountering the linguistic

[35] Roland Barthes, S/Z: An Essay, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) p. 4.

model of reflexivity so radically insisted upon by Jacques Lacan. In Felman's words, he could be said to discover that:

> ... there are no longer distinct centers but only contradictory gravitational pulls: two pseudo-centers – "the subject of the signifier" (of the utterance) and "the subject of the signified" (of the statement) – even though they are radically different from each other, are no longer entirely distinct and cannot be separated from each other: each can also be the Other, is "inmixed" with the Other.[36]

There is, moreover, no way in which he can make sense of the text without becoming a part of the interpretive paradox, for in the very act of interpretation, his repression of difference will manifest itself to the detecting eye of another reader as a flaw, a lack in meaning, which calls once again for interpretive activity. This is an issue to which I shall be returning repeatedly in this thesis. For the present, let us consider what the implications of this "new way of reading" might be.

IN CONCLUSION

Since "meaning" and the "play of difference", or interpretation and the divisiveness of meaning, seem mutually exclusive, does the practice of "a new way of reading" imply abandoning the quest for "truth" and discarding the question "What does the text mean?"? If so, what of the reader? Is his task no longer to interpret, to clarify, "the meaning" or "the truth" of the text? Exactly what

[36] Felman, "The Originality of Jacques Lacan." p. 55.

activity does he engage in?

In order to respond to such questions, I wish first to return to certain comments made by Anthony Wilden on the matters of "knowledge" and "the truth", "misrecognition" and "recognition", to which I have already referred in my Introduction (vide p. 52). Wilden argues as follows:

> Since the discovery of the lack of object is for Lacan the condition and the cause of desire, the adult quest for transcendence, lost time, lost paradises, lost plenitude, or any of the myriad forms the lack of object may take ... can be reduced, if one wishes, to the question at the root of neurosis and psychosis, the question asked by Oedipus: "Who (or what) am I?" The subject, like Oedipus, always knows the answer, but the distinction between Knowledge (savoir) and truth repeatedly emphasized by Lacan points up the function of méconnaissance and reconnaissance in human life. Truth for the subject is not knowledge but recognition. Mental illness on the other hand is precisely the refusal to recognize that truth; the mechanisms of negation, disavowal, rejection, isolation, and so forth flow from it. But a certain méconnaissance – which we might call sublimation – is essential to health; Dostoievskian hyperconsciousness is no solution. The point is of course that hyperconsciousness or hyperrecognition simply corresponds to the intensity of the loss [the primal loss of "full subjectivity," "full truth" and so forth that is an irreducible outcome of language acquisition].[37]

Now if, in this context, one interprets "the subject" more specifically as "the reader of fiction," one might argue that if such a reader believes that "the truth", as some finally satisfying "message" does indeed await him in the contents of the text, he is suffering from a misrecognition of the nature of "truth" and of the operation of language as a representative system. On the other hand, if the same reader abandons any hope of achieving a meaningful

[37] Wilden, in Lacan, Speech and Language, p. 166.

interpretation of the literary text on the basis of his recognition that such "meaning" can only ever be partial and therefore unsatisfactory, he does indeed seem doomed to a condition of "Dostoievskian hyperconsciousness." In terms of the reading of fiction, what Wilden's suggestion of a "certain méconnaissance — which we might call sublimation —" would seem to suggest is, that the reader's interpretive activity should entail a dialectical process whereby his Desire for "full meaning" and the subsequent recognition of the impossibility of satisfying that Desire, be sublimated into a state of "knowing misrecognition" through the construction of meaning which, if never fully satisfying, is at least an unconditionally repeatable consolation for the "primal loss" resulting from language acquisition.

The "new way of reading" should not then be seen as a "change of focus" or a "change of centre" from the quest after the "truth" to the recognition that there can be no such truth. It should rather, like Lacan's new mode of reflexivity, be seen as a "process of decentering," a process whereby the reader, in a repetition of the authorial activity, participates in, or performs the division of "meaning" which allows "the truth" to stand as an illusionary centrality that is sustained by, or conversely, that might be subverted by, the Other as marginal difference. Instead of standing outside the text then, as the detached "witness" who asks "What does the text mean?" "What is its 'truth'?" the reader may be conceived of as necessarily involved in the text, decentering "the truth" in order

to discover at what price it stands. His question thus becomes, "How does the text mean?" "What does 'the truth' disregard or fail to account for in order to be 'the truth'?"

* * * * *

CHAPTER TWO

NARRATION AS A READING EFFECT: THE OTHER AS THE UNKNOWABLE IN FAULKNER'S ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

> Reading is dramatized not as an emotive reaction to what language does, but as an emotive reaction to the impossibility of knowing what it might be up to.
>
> — Paul de Man (Yale French Studies, 1977)

In the preceding chapter, my chief concern was to investigate the way in which narrative conventions operate to produce literary "truth" and to propose that the recognition and understanding of this operation invites a new conception of the activity of reading. In the course of this investigation, two other issues were raised: firstly, the question of the supplementarity of apparently opposing identities both at the level of the story – the relation between detective and criminal – and at the level of the discourse – the relation between reader and writer. Secondly the question was raised of the implications of the Other as the "blind-spot", the unknown, of any particular subjective position. These issues having been only raised in the previous chapter, it will be the task of this chapter to pursue them further, examining in particular the view of the narrative as "an effect of reading," and the implications for the reader of the Other as an irreducible mystery or irrecoverably lost "origin" in the literary text. William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! is a particularly appropriate text for this investigation for the following reasons: it is a text which has frequently been described as having the characteristics of a detective novel,[1] and

[1] Some critics who have described the text as having characteristics of detective fiction are: Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1963 rpt 1977) p. 311; Peter Brooks, "Incredulous Narration: Absalom, Absalom!" Contemporary Literature, 34, 3 (1982) pp. 247-268; C. Hugh Holman, "Absalom, Absalom!: The Historian as Detective," The Sewanee Review, 79, 3 (1971) pp. 542-553: Susan Resneck Parr, "The Fourteenth Image of the Blackbird: Another Look at Truth in Absalom, Absalom!" Arizona Quarterly, 35, 2 (1979) pp. 154-164.

insofar as it is structured around the mystery of a murder – the murder of Charles Bon by Henry Sutpen – and is constituted by the attempts of various narrators to reconstruct the events relevant to the murder, this description is acceptable. Absalom, Absalom! then, lends itself to a continuation of the discussion started in Chapter One. However, it is also a text which by its very questing investigative structure raises questions about interpretation and narration, about the nature of "truth" and the nature of "mystery", about authority, succession, boundaries, identities and differences, which seem less germane to detective fiction than to anti-detective fiction (such as The Erasers) and tragedy (such as Oedipus Rex on which The Erasers draws for so much of its effect). These are the concerns which make Absalom, Absalom! particularly illuminating to the argument which this chapter will follow.

To clarify what is liable to be a complex and lengthy discussion, I shall now offer an introductory overview of the central questions which I want to consider in this chapter. In a reading of Absalom, Absalom! one of the first issues which calls for attention is the multiple perspective of the narrative structure, which raises many interesting debates – particularly with regard to reading – as is suggested by the volume of critical work devoted to this issue.[2] The most easily identifiable of the various

[2] The volume of critical material on this aspect of the novel is extensive. The following articles were found particularly useful to this discussion: Cleanth Brooks, "The Narrative Structure of Absalom, Absalom!" The Georgia Review, 29 (Summer, 1975), pp.

narrative perspectives are those of the four first-person dramatized narrators, Miss Rosa Coldfield, Mr Compson, Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon. Now, while many critics accept without question that the "truth" of the text is unveiled by the combined narrative activity of Quentin and Shreve, others are at pains to demonstrate that no indication is given that any one of the discourses presenting the story is overtly privileged as more truthful than any other. This question will be closely investigated as the various versions of the Sutpen story are explored; however it is worth considering initially how much narrative authority is attributed to other more peripheral discourses in the text.

Besides the four primary narrators already mentioned, there is also an overt narrator who coordinates the dialogue of narrator and narratee and who occasionally recedes to a covert position as, for example, in the scene between Thomas and Henry Sutpen in the Confederate Army tent in the closing weeks of the Civil War.[3] Although this narrator is more

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366-394; Thomas Connolly, "Point of View in Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!" Modern Fiction Studies, 27, 2 (1981) pp. 255-272; Lynne Gartrell Levins, "The Four Narrative Perspectives in Absalom, Absalom!" PMLA 85, 1 (1970) pp. 35-47; and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, "From Reproduction to Production: The Status of Narration in Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!" Degrès: Revue de Synthese D' Orientation Semiologique, 16 (1978) pp. 1-19.

[3] William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Random House, 1964) pp. 352ff. All subsequent references to this text will be included in the body of the chapter using the abbreviation AA followed by the relevant page number.

privileged than the four dramatized narrators, having what Wayne C. Booth describes as "the most important single privilege ... of obtaining an inside view of another character,"[4] – he is able, for example, to give the reader insight into Quentin's thoughts (AA pp. 10-11) – he never offers his own version of the Sutpen story, nor does he appear to be attributed knowledge of "the truth". Instead he seems content to regard the status of "truth" as approximate rather than absolute. This is illustrated for example, when he judges Quentin and Shreve's description of Charles Bon's mother – "the slight dowdy woman with untidy gray-streaked raven hair coarse as a horse's tail, with parchment-colored skin and implacable pouched black eyes which alone showed no age because they showed no forgetting," (AA p. 335) – to be an "invention" which was "probably true enough." From the overt narrator's perspective then, "the truth" remains open to further speculation and refinement.

Another narrative point of view is presented in the letter which is reputed to have been written by Charles Bon to Judith Sutpen towards the end of the war. While as "letter" this text might be assumed to have the status of "authentic historic document", its description as being "without date or salutation or signature" (AA p. 129), foregrounds its representational and therefore iterable nature, calling into question the compatibility of the

[4] Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961) p. 160.

notions "authenticity" and "textuality".

Further perspectives are offered in the five tombstones, and the again supposedly documentary texts of the Chronology, the Genealogy and the Map which are appended to the narrative text. Here the "truth-value" of the "documentary" is called into question, for while the evidence on the tombstones corroborates the evidence in the narrative discourse, it is frequently contradicted by the "documentary" evidence. For example, while the tombstone of Ellen Coldfield/Sutpen states her dates of birth and death as follows: "Born October 9, 1817. Died January 23, 1863," the Genealogy describes her as "Born in Tennessee, 1818,... Died Sutpen's Hundred 1862." The Chronology agrees with the Genealogy. Then in the case of Thomas Sutpen, while Quentin Compson states in the course of his narrative that Sutpen "became confused about his age and was never able to straighten it out again, so that he told Grandfather that he did not know within a year on either side just how old he was," (AA p. 227), while he repeats this point twice (AA pp. 228 and 229), and while no birthdate appears on Sutpen's tombstone, the Chronology and Genealogy both record his birthdate as 1807. Yet again, while on his tombstone the name of Bon's son is spelt "Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon," the Genealogy spells it "Charles Etienne De Saint Velery Bon." While Judith and Charles Bon are described by Mr Compson as dying of yellow fever (AA p. 210), the Chronology describes them as dying of smallpox.[5]

[5] Interesting research of this point is provided by Susan

Without an authoritative narrative perspective to verify any particular information as "the truth", these discrepancies raise two inevitable questions: firstly, is "the truth" presented as "accessible" in this text, and if so, what is the nature of this "truth"?

Returning once again to the discourse of the four first-person dramatized narrators, what I wish to propose in this chapter is that Absalom, Absalom! presents a view of narration which supports the proposition that narrative is an effect of reading. Now, as discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis (see pages 61-63), Lacanian analysis has presented us with a model of interpretation or reading as a "return to the Other," or an attempt to translate into rational terms that which in a preceding discourse appears to escape such translation. In Absalom, Absalom! each narrator, addressing a dramatized narratee,

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Resneck Parr. She writes:

"Almost a decade after Absalom, Absalom! was published, in 1945, Faulkner added a similarly factually inaccurate Genealogy to The Sound and the Fury. In the appendix which he wrote for Malcolm Cowley's Portable Faulkner, Faulkner once again provided a history of characters and events which differed from that given in the novel itself. Faulkner's explanation of the factual discrepancies to his distraught editor, Cowley, seems equally applicable to Absalom, Absalom! To begin with, Faulkner described the appendix's narrator as the town historian, the Garter King-at-Arms who "knew only what the town could have told him.'* Moreover, despite Cowley's efforts to the contrary, Faulkner insisted on keeping in the appendix the discrepancies between it and the novel. ... The point here is that in both novels Faulkner's appended genealogies are themselves part of the larger narrative structure. In each instance, they provide one more example of an unreliable narrator's version of events and not details with "auctorial sanction" as Brooks asserts about the genealogy in Absalom, Absalom!** – "The Fourteenth Image of the Blackbird," pp. 155-156. Parr's footnotes refer to the following texts:

* Malcolm Cowley, ed., The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letter and Memories, 1944-1962 (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), p. 44.

** Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country, p. 433.

attempts, as knowing, rational subject, to make meaning of the unknowable, irrational Other which erupts as an unanswered question into the "biography" of Thomas Sutpen threatening to transform "his-story" into meaningless catastrophe. In so doing, each narrator can be seen to transfer onto his listener/reader, the effect of the unknowable. This effect repeats itself in the reader as his Desire to make meaning of, or to narrate, the story of Thomas Sutpen. Thus the chain of narration handed from speaker to speaker – for example, from Miss Rosa to Quention to Shreve, or from General Compson to Mr Compson to Quention to Shreve – is simultaneously a chain of readings. As Shoshana Felman points out,

> In the chain transmission of the story, each narrator, to relay the story, must first be a receiver of the story, a reader who at once records it and interprets it, simultaneously trying to make sense of it and undergoing it, as a lived experience, an "impression," a reading effect.[6]

Clearly, the chain of narration is a chain in which the reader himself must become implicated, for if – as has already been suggested of Absalom, Absalom! – the text refuses to authorize any particular interpretation as "conclusive", the reader must himself be provoked, by the failure of meaning or the repetition of the question, to the action of telling, of replying. In other words, the very action of telling which this chapter itself embodies, can

[6] Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," p. 124.

be regarded as a reading effect which in its turn will produce in its reader an effect to reproduce. To borrow again from the insights of Felman,

> The very act of telling, of narration, proceeds then from the potentially infinite repercussion of an effect of reading; an effect that, once produced, seeks to reproduce itself as an effect yet to be produced – an effect whose effect is an effect to produce. Narrative as such turns out to be the trace of the action of a reading; it is, in fact, reading as action.[7]

At the level of the discourse then, it can be argued that the text of Absalom, Absalom! subverts the opposition of the activities of narrating and listening, or writing and reading, and thereby implicitly deconstructs the binary oppositions of narrator/narratee or writer/reader, presenting such supposedly separate "identities" as the products of their reciprocal "inmixing" or mutual participation in each other.

The validity of arranging difference according to binary oppositions is similarly placed in question at the level of the story. As a text which concerns itself with a mythical account of the causes and effects of the American Civil War, the collapse of the plantation society in the deep Southern "world" of Yoknapatwpha County, but most particularly with the story of Thomas Sutpen's tragic failure to establish the Sutpen dynasty, Absalom, Absalom! concerns itself with the hierarchical arrangements of oppositions such as paternity/filiality, male/female, wealthy/

[7] Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," p. 126.

impoverished, white/black and so forth, upon which notions of social order such as "authority" and "succession" depend. More particularly, it repeatedly addresses itself to the problem of the "undecidable", the ambiguity or excess of meaning which refuses translation into a Symbolic Order that is founded on such hierarchical arrangement of oppositions.

These then, are the issues raised by Absalom, Absalom! on which this chapter will focus: the nature and accessibility of textual "truth"; the supplementarity of the narrative and interpretive activities; and the problems arising from the ordering of difference according to a system of hierarchical binary oppositions.

THE IRREDUCIBLE STRANGENESS OF THE OTHER IN MISS ROSA'S DEMON MYTH

The text of Absalom, Absalom! opens with the overt narrator's description of the setting of Miss Rosa Coldfield's narrative to Quentin Compson on a late summer afternoon in September. Miss Rosa's narrative constitutes a twofold problem for Quentin as her narratee. Firstly, her own identity is strangely ambiguous. As a "ghost" of the past occupying "the office ... a dim hot airless room ..." pervaded by "the dim coffin-smelling gloom ... and the rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity" (AA pp. 7-8), she intrudes unexpectedly into Quentin's life, summoning him by means of a small, note-bearing negro (AA p. 10), in order to recount her story

to him for the strange reason that it might be of use to him in his future literary career (AA pp. 9-10). Not only does she straddle the worlds of "living" and "dead" – she is "one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times" (AA p. 9) – but she also straddles the roles of "male" and "female" being a sixty-five year old spinster daughter who takes upon herself the "office" – the locus and the function – of her father.[8] Miss Rosa's narrative is, furthermore, a return of, and a return to, Thomas Sutpen as unlaid ghost; it is the product of the effect on Miss Rosa of Sutpen as an untranslatable, irreducible mystery. As Quentin listens to Miss Rosa's attempt to interpret the story of Sutpen, the effect of Sutpen as mystery repeats itself in him as an irresolvable contradiction in his own interpretive consciousness – a contradiction between his inherited knowledge of the Sutpen myth and the strangeness of the interpretation which he is being coerced into hearing from Miss Rosa:

> ... the two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence of notpeople, in notlanguage, like this: *It seems that this demon – his name was Sutpen – (Colonel Sutpen) – Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation – (Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) – tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and daughter which – (Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) –*

[8] I am indebted to Robert Con Davis for this ambiguous reading of "office". He writes, "... Rosa's rage fulfills the father's office – that is, 'office' as a function – in a profound way." – "The Symbolic Father in Yoknapatawpha County," The Journal of Narrative Technique, 10 (1980) p. 50.

> *without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only — (Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died) — and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says — (Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson)* (AA p. 9).

This passage evokes two conflicting interpretations of Sutpen: on one hand, as Colonel, he commands the respect of society, building a plantation and "begetting" a family who are to be "*the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age.*" In other words, Sutpen seems to conform to the Old Testament ideal of the father who seeks to perpetuate himself and his values in his children. Interfering with this version are the interjections of Miss Rosa's interpretation. In her terms, "*Colonel Sutpen*" is a "*demon*"; to her he did not "*build a plantation*" but "*tore violently a plantation*"; his action of having "*begot a son and daughter*" is qualified as "*without gentleness begot.*" Sutpen then, seems to evoke a direct contradiction between a view of construction and perpetuation and that of destruction and damnation. If Quentin's interior discourse reflects the effect of his reading as a desire to narrate however, this desire is not to be permitted any expression in Miss Rosa's presence. In the face of her unfaltering, unquestionable authority, Quentin can only be a listener who utters the acquiescent noises "Yessum" and "No'me," and the reader, taking this cue from Quentin can expect to find himself cast in the role of textual "consumer" as long as Miss Rosa asserts her authority as its "producer." This assertiveness seems to stem from her furious determination to

make meaning of, and thereby control, the subversive Otherness of Thomas Sutpen, which all her life has evaded her understanding. In other words, Miss Rosa's narrative dramatizes the act of reading as an attempt to dominate, to gain control over knowledge of the Other. As Felman argues:

> If it is precisely out of lack of knowledge that the reading-process springs, the very act of reading implies at the same time the assumption that knowledge is, exists, but is located in the Other; in order for reading to be possible, there has to be knowledge in the Other ... and it is that knowledge in the Other, of the Other, which must be read which has to be appropriated, taken from the Other ... The comprehension ... of the meaning the Other is presumed to know, which constitutes the ultimate aim of any act of reading, is thus conceived as a violent gesture of appropriation, a gesture of domination of the Other. Reading, in other words, establishes itself as a relation not only to knowledge but equally to power; it consists not only of a search for meaning but also of a struggle to control it.[9]

Thomas Sutpen as Devilish Other

Miss Rosa's narrative proper begins with the categorical assertion:

> He wasn't a gentleman. He wasn't even a gentleman. He came here with a horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before, knew for certain was his own any more than the horse was his own or even the pistols, seeking some place to hide himself, and Yoknapatawpha County supplied him with it
>
> (AA pp. 14-15)

The signs of "horse," "two pistols" and the need for "some place to hide," identify Sutpen as "Outlaw" in the mythical

[9] Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," p. 157 and 164.

Symbolic Order of Yoknapatawpha County.[10] Because his name is an empty signifier within this society, because he manifests no claim to any property nor to any achievement, he cannot easily be placed in an Order which upholds amongst its ideals, genealogical identity, evidence of property and a record of pioneering achievement. Consequently he becomes identified, particularly in Miss Rosa's eyes, as an embodiment of the untranslatable, inexplicable Other. This Otherness of Sutpen is corroborated by the foreign nature of the henchmen he introduces into the community – the French architect and the foreign negroes whom Miss Rosa describes as,

> "... a herd of wild beasts that he had hunted down singlehanded because he was stronger in fear than even they were in whatever heathen place he had fled from, and that French architect who looked like he had been hunted down and caught in turn by the negroes ..." (AA p. 16).

The difference of Sutpen and his henchmen from the other inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha County is particularly emphasized by the language they speak amongst themselves which, being initially unidentified, is the source of great suspicion although it is eventually revealed to be "a sort

[10] It is important to emphasize that the interpretation of the Symbolic Order of the deep Southern plantation society presented in this chapter is founded specifically on the description of the South that the text of Absalom, Absalom! presents. I shall undertake to clarify certain historical issues by way of footnotes where such issues are relevant to the arguments I am offering. No evaluation of Faulkner's "historical accuracy" is intended.

of French and not some dark and fatal tongue of their own" (AA p. 36). It is possibly on this common bond of language that Sutpen's amiable relationship with his negroes depends, for as Cleanth Brooks argues,[11] if Sutpen observes the colour bar which prevails in the plantation community, he does so without the usual Southern animosity towards negroes which Miss Rosa might judge to be the norm.

Once Miss Rosa has identified Sutpen as an embodiment of Otherness, it is no longer necessary for her to interpret him or his actions in rational terms. Instead, she casts him in the role of an Agent or Force of evil — a "fiend blackguard and devil" (AA p. 15) — whose actions are a series of outrages threatening order. In other words her narrative takes the form of a myth in which a community on earth is harrassed by the machinations of the devil incarnate. She views her sister, her nephew and her niece as the particular victims of these machinations. As the appended analysis of the role structure of a portion of Miss Rosa's discourse illustrates,[12] the roles which she most commonly attributes to her sister and the Sutpen children are those of Experiencer and Patient who suffer the actions of an Agency and Force of evil that is beyond their control. On the occasions on which these victims are attributed the roles of Agents, they are interpreted as imple-

[11] Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country, pp. 298-300.

[12] (see next page)

[12] The following role structure analysis works within a "case-grammar" framework of the type developed by Charles Fillmore in "The Case for the Case," in Universals in Linguistic Theory, ed. Emmon Bach and Robert Harms (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

I saw what happened to Ellen, my sister. I saw her almost a
AGENT EXPERIENCER AGENT EXPERIENCER

recluse, watching those two doomed children growing up whom she was
EXPERIENCER EXPERIENCERS PATIENT AGENT

helpless to save. I saw the price which she had paid for that house
AGENT PATIENT AGENT PATIENT

and that pride; I saw the notes of hand on pride and contentment
PATIENT AGENT PATIENT PATIENT

and peace and all to which she had put her signature when she walked
PATIENT AGENT PATIENT AGENT

into the church that night, begin to fall due in succession. I saw
LOCATION AGENT

Judith's marriage forbidden without rhyme or reason or shadow of ex-
PATIENT PATIENT PATIENT PATIENT

cuse; I saw Ellen die with only me, a child, to turn to and ask to
AGENT EXPERIENCER INSTRUMENT

protect her remaining child; I saw Henry repudiate his home and birth-
PATIENT AGENT AGENT PATIENT PATIENT

right and then return and practically fling the bloody corpse of his
PATIENT

sister's sweetheart at the hem of her wedding gown; I saw that man
PATIENT LOCATION AGENT AGENT

return — the evil's source and head which had outlasted all its victims
FORCE PATIENTS

— who had created two children not only to destroy one another and
AGENT PATIENT AGENT PATIENT

his own line, but my line as well, yet I agreed to marry him. (AA p. 18).
PATIENT PATIENT AGENT PATIENT

The role types used in this analysis are derived from the descriptions offered by E.C. Traugott and M.L. Pratt in their work Linguistics for Students of Literature. They are describable as follows:

1. AGENT: The "agent" function is that of the doer who is responsible for an action or event taking place.

menting their own or each other's destruction. To herself however, in the repeated statement "I saw", Miss Rosa attributes the role of Agent, the eye-witness who bases her claim to authority on the immediate experience of events which are now lost in the past, but which she seems to believe are fully recuperable in the discourse of her narrative.

Particularly noticeable, both in the appended passage and elsewhere in her narrative are the presuppositions of the narratee's familiarity with information as yet unnarrated. For example, the first sentence in the appended passage — " *I saw what happened to Ellen, my sister.*" — presupposes awareness that Ellen was victim of some misfortune. The second sentence — "*I saw her almost a recluse, watching those two doomed children growing up whom she was helpless to save.*" — presupposes awareness that her two children were in some way

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2. PATIENT: This is the role of the being or thing that is affected by an action or event, or that is simply present in it.

3. FORCE: This is the role of things which initiate actions without the volition that could be attributed to humans or animals.

4. EXPERIENCER: An animate being affected inwardly by an event or characterized by a state can be identified as an EXPERIENCER.

5. INSTRUMENT: This is the role applied to the object or article used to achieve a particular end. Usually it is combined with the prepositional construction "with + NP".

6. LOCATION: Location is the role of "place-in-which", introducible by a variety of prepositions which contribute information about dimensional relations.

— E.L. Traugott and M.L. Pratt, Linguistics for Students of Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich Inc., 1980) pp. 192-198.

ill-fated. While these presuppositions may present no difficulty to Quentin Compson who has inherited knowledge of the Sutpen myth, for the uninitiated reader, Miss Rosa's narrative must appear a dense network of enigmas and tantalizingly witheld information which is liable to stimulate the reader's Demand-to-know without contributing greatly to the progress of his quest for "the truth".

The Symbolic Order of the Deep Southern Plantation Society

As Miss Rosa elaborates her description of Sutpen and his family, she simultaneously presents the reader with a picture of the Symbolic Order of Yoknapatawpha County which she regards as subverted by his sinister activities. Her narration focuses on two particular recollections, the first of these being Sutpen's wild carriage races to church of a Sunday which Miss Rosa regards as clear manifestations of his devilry. After the Methodist minister prohibits these races, Sutpen stops attending church, but the carriage, drawn by the wild-eyed horses and driven by a wild-eyed negro continues to transport the rest of the family to the weekly service. When one day the usual equipage is replaced, presumably under Ellen's instructions, by her own phaeton, her old gentle mare and the stableboy, Judith Sutpen, then a little girl of six, throws a tantrum of fury and frustration. To Miss Rosa, the implication that Judith not only enjoyed, but was possibly the instigator of the wild rides, is appalling:

"... it had been Judith, a girl of six, who had insti-

> gated and authorized that negro to make the team run away. Not Henry mind; not the boy, which would have been outrageous enough; but Judith, the girl" (AA p. 25).

In Miss Rosa's eyes Judith's behaviour subverts the expectations of restraint and submission congruent with the place of female and child in the Symbolic Order of deep Southern Yoknapatawpha County of 1847. She is therefore regarded by Miss Rosa as the devil's progeny doomed to allegiance with the Otherness of her demon father.

In Miss Rosa's second anecdote a clearer indication is given of the place not only of women but of children and of negroes in the Symbolic Order. This anecdote describes Ellen Sutpen's discovery one night of both her children watching their father's wrestling match with one of his negroes in the stable:

> "Yes. It seems that on certain occasions, perhaps at the end of the evening, the spectacle, as a grand finale or perhaps as a matter of sheer deadly forethought toward the retention of supremacy, domination, he would enter the ring with one of the negroes himself. Yes. That's what Ellen saw: her husband and the father of her children standing there naked and panting and bloody to the waist and the negro just fallen evidently, lying at his feet and bloody too, save that on the negro it merely looked like grease or sweat — Ellen running down the hill from the house, bareheaded, in time to hear the sound, the screaming, hearing it while she still ran in the darkness and before the spectators knew that she was there, hearing it even before it occurred to one spectator to say, 'It's a horse' then 'It's a woman' then 'My God, it's a child' — ran in, and the spectators falling back to permit her to see Henry plunge out from among the negroes who had been holding him, screaming and vomiting — not pausing, not even looking at the faces which shrank back away from her as she knelt in the stable filth to raise Henry and not looking at Henry either but up at him as he stood there with even his teeth showing beneath his beard now and another negro wiping the blood from his body with a towsack. 'I know you will excuse

> us, gentlemen,' Ellen said. But they were already departing, nigger and white, slinking out again as they had slunk in, and Ellen not watching them now either but kneeling in the dirt while Henry clung to her, crying, and he standing there yet while a third nigger prodded his shirt or coat at him as though the coat were a stick and he a caged snake. 'Where is Judith, Thomas?' Ellen said.
>
> "'Judith?' he said. Oh, he was not lying; his own triumph had outrun him; he had builded even better in evil than even he could have hoped. 'Judith? Isn't she in bed?'
>
> "'Don't lie to me, Thomas,' Ellen said. 'I can understand your bringing Henry here to see this, wanting Henry to see this; I will try to understand it; yes, I will make myself try to understand it. But not Judith, Thomas. Not my baby girl, Thomas.'
>
> "'I don't expect you to understand it,' he said. 'Because you are a woman. But I didn't bring Judith down here. I would not bring her down here. I don't expect you to believe that. But I swear to it.'
>
> "'I wish I could believe you,' Ellen said. 'I want to believe you.' Then she began to call. 'Judith!' she called in a voice calm and sweet and filled with despair: 'Judith honey! Time to come to bed.'
>
> "But I was not there. I was not there to see the two Sutpen faces this time — once on Judith and once on the negro girl beside her — looking down through the square entrance to the loft" (AA pp. 29-30).

The contest on which this scene focuses could be interpreted as a form of ritual demonstration in overt physical terms, of the supremacy of the white master over his negro slaves. This contest does not appear to be founded on any necessary aggression between the contestants, but rather on Sutpen's acknowledgement that in a Southern plantation society his ownership of and mastery over his slaves will expedite the "design" he sets out to implement. He therefore demonstrates his right to the role of master through his skill in wrestling. The immediate dispersal of the gathering on Ellen's arrival suggests that the presence of women, black or white, at such male "rites" is strictly

taboo. This is emphasized by Sutpen's acknowledgement to Ellen, "I don't expect you to understand it ... Because you are a woman." While the presence of children at such contests is not desirable, it would seem from Ellen's discourse with Sutpen that Henry, as potential initiate to the paternal role might be permitted to attend: "I can understand your bringing Henry here to see this, wanting Henry to see this; I will try to understand it; yes, I will make myself try to understand it." These words suggest moreover that Ellen is conscious of the demands of obeisance to the patriarchal authority which her role as woman in this Symbolic Order entails. In spite of her suspicion that Sutpen is failing in his duty as protector of his offspring, particularly of his daughter, Ellen confirms her allegiance to him when she says "I will make myself try to understand it," and "I want to believe you." When Sutpen on the other hand argues that he is unaware of his daughter's presence, he verifies the unpredictability and non-conformity of the Sutpen children's behaviour in relation to the norms of the society. In Miss Rosa's opinion, his apparent ignorance of Judith's whereabouts indicates that the child has become even more corrupt than her demon father had anticipated. Thus while Henry, the apparently legitimate successor to the authoritative paternal role is revolted to the point of vomiting by the spectacle of the confrontation of white male with his black other, Judith and her companion, whom the reader will discover to be Judith's half-sister Clytemnestra, are apparently fascinated

by that which is forbidden them by the laws of social order, namely the exercise of "author-ity".

From the first chapter of Miss Rosa's narration then, it seems clear that authority in this plantation society of Faulkner's mythical deep South is invested in the figure of the white land-owning patriarch. His masculinity defines him as master of his female dependants; his antecedence and therefore paternity defines him as authority over his sons as heirs to the dynasty; his whiteness distinguishes him as the master of his negro slaves; and his wealth defines him as lord over impoverished "white trash". In this Symbolic Order then, binary oppositions are arranged hierarchically so that one component of the opposition is privileged over the other: white is privileged over black; male over female; wealthy over impoverished; the temporarily antecedent over the subsequent. These differences are then translated into a wider hierarchy in which white, male, property-owning father stands as the ideal of authority, while the black, female, impoverished child stands as his diametrical opposite.

Frequently it is demonstrated that those who are oppressed within the Symbolic Order by virtue of their difference from the ideal authority, seek to emulate that ideal to which they aspire. In so doing they unwittingly perpetuate the very oppression to which they themselves have been subjected in the hierarchical order. This is illustrated for example in the language choice of Wash Jones whose lowliness is evident in his identification as "white

trash" (AA p. 181). For Jones, Thomas Sutpen, his master, is idealized – "*A fine proud man. If God Himself was to come down and ride the natural earth, that's what He would aim to look like*" (AA p. 282) – and is therefore addressed with meticulous respect as "Mister Tawm" (AA p. 183) or "Kernel" (AA pp. 184-185). However, Jones uses less respectful terms when, for example, he addressed the negroes as "niggers" (AA p. 281); similarly he addresses Miss Rosa Coldfield who is unmarried and a young woman as "Rosie Coldfield" (AA p. 133); Henry Sutpen who is too young yet to succeed to his father's office as "Henry" (AA p. 133); and Charles Bon who is an outsider and who is later described as both possibly effeminate and possibly part-negro, as "that durn French feller" (AA p. 133). Following the same convention, Miss Rosa refers to Wash Jones as "that brute progenitor of brutes" (AA p. 134), addressing him to his face as "fool" (AA p. 135), while Clytie she addresses as "nigger" (p. 140). Clytie in her turn, by virtue of her own white Sutpen blood, and their mutual femininity apparently regards Miss Rosa as her equal when she commands "Don't you go up there, Rosa" (AA p. 138). She refers to Henry and Judith as her siblings when she says, "Whatever he [Henry] done, me and Judith and him have paid it out (AA p. 370). Wash Jones she addresses as a rank inferior: "Stop right there, white man. Stop right where you is. You aint never crossed this door while Colonel was here and you aint going to cross it now." (AA p. 281). Thus, by denying respect to those considered to "less" than the ideal, each of the

oppressed members of the society perpetuates the hierarchy which determines his own oppression. Noticeably Clytie does not address or refer to Sutpen as her father — a point to which I shall return later.

Miss Rosa: Woman as Author-ity

Miss Rosa's narrative is interrupted by the three-chapter narration of Mr Compson, and when she resumes her story, the sources of ambiguity in her own identity are more thoroughly explored. This second segment of narrative begins with Wash Jones's announcement outside Miss Rosa's home that Charles Bon has been murdered. Returning with Jones by buggy to Sutpen's Hundred, Miss Rosa enters the Sutpen mansion encountering first Clytie and then Judith. She describes herself as wakening from a dream state:

> *I, the dreamer clinging yet to the dream as the patient clings to the last thin unbearable ecstatic instant of agony in order to sharpen the savor of the pain's surcease, waking into the reality, the more than reality, not to the unchanged and unaltered old time but into a time altered to fit the dream which, conjunctive with the dreamer, becomes immolated and apotheosized ... (Ay, wake up, Rosa; wake up — not from what was, what used to be, but from what had not, could not have ever, been; wake, Rosa — not to what should, what might have been, but to what cannot, what must not, be; wake, Rosa, from the hoping, who did believe there is a seemliness to bereavement even though grief be absent; believed there would be need for you to save not love perhaps, not happiness nor peace, but what was left behind by widowing — and found that there was nothing there to save; who hoped to save her as you promised Ellen* ... (AA p. 141).

Rosa does not experience this "awakening" as a transition from a past set of circumstances when Charles Bon was alive, to a new set in which he must be accepted as dead. Instead

it is a transition from a state of expectation, in which she believed that her role would be that of "saviour" to the bereaved Judith, to a realization that her role is superfluous since Judith does not appear to grieve over Bon's death. In order to explain the nature of the dream-state in which she has been living, Miss Rosa reverts to a description of her youth and the "miscast" summer of wistaria. The reader has already been given some view of this youth in Mr Compson's narrative:

> She (Miss Rosa) was born in 1845, with her sister already seven years married and the mother of two children and Miss Rosa born into her parents' middle-age (her mother must have been at least forty and she died in that childbed and Miss Rosa never forgave her father for it) ... She was raised by the same spinster aunt who tried to force not only the elder sister's bridegroom but the wedding too down the throat of a town which did not want it, growing up in that closed masonry of females to see in the fact of her own breathing not only the lone justification for the sacrifice of her mother's life, not only a living and walking reproach to her father, but a breathing indictment, ubiquitous and even transferable, of the entire male principle (that principle which had left the aunt a virgin at thirty-five) (AA pp. 59-60).

If, as has already been established, the "male principle" is the authoritative ideal of the society into which Miss Rosa is born, its failure in her case lies in its inability to provide her with a proper place in the Symbolic Order. Since the hierarchical difference of antecedent/subsequent on which the roles of paternity and filiality and the laws of succession depend, are so rigidly defined, Miss Rosa presents an irreducible paradox or excess of meaning to the Symbolic Order of Yoknapatawpha County. For as the

daughter of Goodhue Coldfield and sister of Ellen Sutpen, Rosa should be named "aunt" in an antecedent relation to Judith and Henry Sutpen. However, being younger than both her nephew and her niece, she should be named "child" in a subsequent relation to them. From birth Miss Rosa seems to straddle two worlds: that of children and that of adults. She belongs to both, yet to neither, so that even as a sixty-five year old woman she is described as resembling "a crucified child" (AA p. 8), yet as an adolescent she is described as wearing "a shawl over her head like she might have been fifty instead of fifteen" (AA p. 73).

Being excluded from the world of adults by virtue of her youth, yet isolated from her rightful generation of children by her late birth, Miss Rosa attempts to efface herself in the role of silent inactive listener:

> *... instead of accomplishing the processional and measured milestones of the childhood's time I lurked, unapprehended as though, shod with the very damp and velvet silence of the womb, I displaced no air, gave off no betraying sound, from one closed forbidden door to the next and so acquired all I knew of that light and space in which people moved and breathed as I (that same child) might have gained conception of the sun from seeing it through a piece of smoky glass* ... (AA p. 145).

Miss Rosa's comparison between the "norm" of childhood as a period of exploration and progressional discovery, "the processional and measured milestones of the childhood's time," and her own experience of childhood as a state of soundless, passive suspension or "lurking", suggests the contrast between the activity of digital organisation of experience through the use of language and the

activity of analog perception extrinsic to language.[13] In other words, instead of exploring the world using her own signifying power as a linguistic subject to digitalise or arrange it into patterns of meaning, she silently accepts a world that has already been mediated through conversations she has overheard.

It is in her fourteenth year that Miss Rosa experiences, in her "summer of wistaria," a sudden consciousness of the urge and power to create meaning — a power which she correlates with the authority of the dynamic "male principle". She describes her experience as follows:

> *— Once there was (they cannot have told you this either) a summer of wistaria. It was a pervading everywhere of wistaria (I was fourteen then) as though of all springs yet to capitulate condensed into one spring, one summer: the spring and summertime which is every female's who breathed above dust, beholden of all betrayed springs held over from all irrevocable time, repercussed, bloomed again. It was a vintage year of wistaria: vintage year being that sweet conjunction of root bloom and urge and hour and weather; and I (I was fourteen) — I will not insist on bloom, at whom no man had yet to look — nor would ever — twice, as not as child but less than even child; as not more child than woman but even as less than any female flesh. Nor do I say leaf — warped bitter pale and crimped half-fledging intimidate of any claim to green which might have drawn to it the tender mayfly childhood sweetheart games or given pause to the male predacious wasps and bees of later lust. But root and urge I do insist and claim, for had I not heired too from all the unsistered Eves since the Snake? Yes, urge I do: warped chrysalis of what blind perfect seed: for who shall say what gnarled forgotten*

[13] The association of the linguistic conscious self with the digital, and the non-linguistic unconscious self with the analog is established by Anthony Wilden when he explains that the Lacanian observation, "it is impossible in language for the 'I' of any sentence to properly and entirely talk about the 'I' who emits the sentence," could be expressed in another terminology as, "the subject of digital knowledge can never fully represent the subject of analog knowledge, as poets and artists have always known." — System and Structure, pp. 21-22.

> *root might not bloom yet with some globed concentrate more globed and concentrate and heady-perfect because the neglected root was planted warped and lay not dead but merely slept forgot?*
>
> *That was the miscast summer of my barren youth which (for that short time, that short brief unreturning springtime of the female heart) I lived out not as a woman, a girl, but rather as the man which I perhaps should have been* (AA pp. 143-144).

For Miss Rosa, the wistaria seems to represent the manifestation of female productive energy that has been latent, that has accumulated and finally erupts in a display of fecundity. She regards spring and summer, the time of floral burgeoning in the plant world, as the seasons identifiable with the maturation or blossoming of girlhood into womanhood: "the spring and summertime which is every female's who breathed above dust." Her description of the perfection of the wistaria plant depends on the combination of both "female" and "male" principles in "that sweet conjunction of root bloom and urge and hour and weather." The female principle is dominant and overt in the wistaria, being represented in the blossom and foliage of the plant which correspond to the attributes of quiescent attractiveness recognized as "feminine" in the Symbolic Order of the mythic South. The male principle represented in the "root and urge" of the plant, is concealed under the earth in a recessive and covert position just as the attributes regarded as "masculine" in the Symbolic Order of the South, the attributes of origination, authority and the productive impulse are expected to be recessive in woman, if they are recognized as present in her at all.

However, Miss Rosa is careful to establish that the similarity between herself and the wistaria plant is not a similarity in the female principle. She denies any comparison between her own physical appearance and the allure of the blossoms which invite the agents of fertilisation. She claims no similarity between her own fragile and puny frame and the vitality of the robust green foliage of the plant. Instead the similarity to which she lays claim is the discovery in herself of an urge to authorize, the impulse to create meaning which is the prerogative of the male role in the Symbolic Order in which she lives.

To translate this into Lacanian terms, one might say that she discovers in herself the power of the Phallus, the power to signify, the right to adopt a subjective position from which to establish a pattern of meaning and simultaneously, the Desire that is the by-product of the attainment of subjective identity. The catalyst of this sudden burgeoning of self-awareness in Miss Rosa appears to be the signifier, "Charles Bon."

Charles Bon and Miss Rosa Coldfield:
the Male Principle and Love's Androgynous Advocate

"Charles Bon" is never more than a signifier to Miss Rosa: the verbal signifier of his name which she hears in conversation, and the pictorial signifier of his photograph which she sees on Judith's dressing-table. Although she never sees him in the flesh, either at Sutpen's Hundred or on the one occasion when he and Henry call at her home

only to find her out, his presence as a name is sufficient to transform her:

> *... it was as though that casual pause at my door had left some seed, some minute virulence in this cellar earth of mine ... because I who had learned nothing of love, not even parents' love — that fond dear constant violation of privacy, that stultification of the burgeoning and incorrigible I which is the meed and due of all mammalian meat, became not mistress, not beloved, but more than even love; I became all polymath love's androgynous advocate* (AA p. 146).

The signifier "Charles Bon" represents the male principle which has the power to transform Judith Sutpen from an eighteen year old girl into a woman "in love", the "bride-to-be". Participating vicariously in the romance of Judith's courtship, Miss Rosa sees herself as likewise transformed into "love's advocate." While as the aunt/child she had no clearly defined place in the Symbolic Order, Miss Rosa now accedes to an identity, a subjective position which entitles her to signifying power and the use of the Phallus in the Symbolic Order. With this newfound "authority" she becomes the "producer" of a fictional romance which she believes to be reality. While she identifies with Judith Sutpen's female, submissive role in this romance, she simultaneously identifies herself in the authorial role of the male protagonist Charles Bon.

The fiction which Miss Rosa constructs becomes for her "*that might-have-been which is the single rock we cling to above the maelstrom of unbearable reality*" (AA p. 149-150). If during the years of the war she has no absent sweetheart, husband, father or brother who might stand

as the "lost object" onto whom she can displace her Desire and from whom she might thereby derive a purpose for living, the figure of Charles Bon, the absent hero, stands as fictional substitute. Yet Miss Rosa does not, as might be expected, Desire the return of the hero that will consummate the love she mediates. Instead she accepts that the death of the hero in battle will immortalize love presumably by both deferring but promising its consummation eternally.

What shocks Miss Rosa therefore is not the discovery that Charles Bon has indeed died, but that he has not died heroically in battle – he has been murdered by the brother of his bride-to-be. Worse still is her realization that the bride-to-be shows no apparent signs of distress or mourning. Hurrying to take up her position as comforter of the bereaved, Miss Rosa finds "no grieving widowed bride" (AA p. 142), but Judith,

> *... standing before that closed door which I was not to enter ... her face absolutely calm, looking at me for a moment and just raising her voice enough to be heard in the hall below: "Clytie. Miss Rosa will be here for dinner; you had better get out some more meal": then "Shall we go down stairs? I will have to speak to Mr Jones about some planks and nails"* (AA p. 150).

When Charles Bon is shot by Henry Sutpen, his authority as a representative of the male principle is repudiated. The Symbolic Order which, through the mediation of Henry refuses to accept Bon's authority – for reasons which will be considered in due course – also thereby refuses implicitly to accept the definition which he had provided for Miss Rosa. "All polymath love's androgynous advocate" has no

place in a world where the romantic hero is "dead as a beef" and the romantic heroine speaks not of love or grief but of "more meal" and "planks and nails." Miss Rosa is thus faced with the realization that her identity as "love's advocate" was the product of a dream-world, a world of wish-fulfilment Other than the "real" Symbolic Order to which she is rudely awakened. Here she has no proper place, but must become once more an overdetermined signified who is both "aunt" and "child" yet neither, an "undecidable" in the "text" of Yoknapatawpha County.

Thomas Sutpen: Ogre — War Hero — Demon

It is only after Charles Bon's death that Miss Rosa takes up residence permanently at Sutpen's Hundred. In spite of the variety of reasons which she might convincingly claim for her move from Jefferson, she declares finally,

> *... I don't say any of these. I stayed there and waited for Thomas Sutpen to come home. Yes. You will say (or believe) that I waited even then to become engaged to him; if I said I did not, you would believe I lied. But I do say I did not. I waited for him exactly as Judith and Clytie waited for him: because now he was all we had, all that gave us any reason for continuing to exist, to eat food and sleep and wake and rise again: knowing that he would need us, knowing as we did (who knew him) that he would begin at once to salvage what was left of Sutpen's Hundred and restore it* (AA p. 154).

With the unexpected annihilation of her romantic hero and the consequent cancellation of her identity as "love's advocate" Miss Rosa turns to the only other representative of the male principle accessible to her — the hero of an earlier myth, the ogre-husband of her sister. Discarding

the identity of Sutpen as the ogre or djinn, which she had inherited as a child, she "re-writes" him in the role of war-hero who possesses in the eyes of the nineteen year old girl which she was at the end of the Civil War,

> ... even if only from association with them, the stature and shape of a hero too, and now he also emerging from the same holocaust in which she had suffered, with nothing to face what the future held for the South but his bare hands and the sword which he at least had never surrendered and the citation for valor from his defeated Commander-in-Chief. Oh he was brave (AA p. 19-20).

Miss Rosa describes the period of waiting for Sutpen, with Judith and Clytie as a period of dormancy. The three women exist "... *in an apathy which was almost peace, like that of the blind unsentient earth itself ... not as two white women and a negress, not as three negroes or three white, not even as three women, but merely as three creatures* ..." (AA p. 155). The absence of the male principle, in its ideal form as the patriarchal presence, suspends the process of differentiation which produces meaning in the Symbolic Order. Without the white male patriarch, distinctions such as womanhood, sisterhood and racial pigmentation become empty terms in a significant vacuum.[14] Just as "*sex was some forgotten atrophy like the rudimentary gills we call the tonsils or the still-opposable thumbs for*

[14] Robert Con Davis identifies this mutual definition which the male and female principle derive from one another as follows:

> "By himself, Sutpen is an assertion of nothing, but in relation to the three women he becomes – whether demon or progenitor – an irresistible stimulant, one that produces change if not growth. As abstractions, these terms of Rosa's sexual mythology, cohesion (the women's community) and disruption (the male principle), are mutually dependent for definition: without an expectation of the male, the women

old climbing" (AA p. 155), so Desire, and the power to produce meaning or signify seems dormant in Miss Rosa. It is only when Sutpen returns to the Hundred and to "*that triumvirate motherhood which we three, Judith, Clytie and I, made ...*" (AA p. 162) that Miss Rosa once again receives subjective definition from which she can resume her signifying power. This definition arises from her difference from Sutpen, Judith and Clytie. Unlike them she has no Sutpen blood, an attribute which defines her as a potential mate for Sutpen. Thus, when Sutpen, recognizing in her a last chance of re-establishing his dynasty, proposes marriage to Miss Rosa, giving her Ellen's wedding ring as the sign of their betrothal, she once again is rescued from the indeterminacy of her position as "aunt/child" and receives the new identity of prospective wife.

In this new role, Miss Rosa conceives of herself as a source of energy and warmth to Sutpen in a relationship which she believes to be "love":

> *... I was that sun, who believed that he (after that evening in Judith's room) was not oblivious of me but only unconscious and receptive like the swamp-freed pilgrim feeling earth and tasting sun and light again and aware of neither but only of darkness' and morass' lack — who did believe there was that magic in unkin blood which we call by the pallid name of love that would be, might be sun for him (though I the youngest, weakest) where Judith and Clytie both would cast no shadow; yes, I the youngest there yet potently without measured and measurable age since I alone of them could say, 'O furious mad old man, I hold no sub-*

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are simply unsentient, and without the binding of the women, the male (Sutpen) is an absurd and impotent gesture." — "The Symbolic Father in Yoknapatawpha County," p. 43.

> *stance that will fit your dream but I can give you airy space and scope for your delirium.' And then one afternoon — oh there was a fate in it; afternoon and afternoon and afternoon: do you see? the death of hope and love, the death of pride and principle, and then the death of everything save the old outraged and aghast unbelieving which has lasted for forty-three years* ... (AA pp. 167-168).

Just as in her adolescence Miss Rosa experienced the discovery in herself of a productive energy which she described through the metaphor of the "root and urge" of the summer wistaria, so in her relationship with Sutpen she once again envisages herself as the origin of a generative energy identified in the metaphor of the sun: a concentration of warmth and illumination which fills the "*darkness' and morass' lack*" that she imagines to be the experience of the war veteran. Although she is accurate in identifying the "*unkin blood* " as the source of her new identity, she ironically believes in some inexplicable or "*magic* " component of that difference which translates her into the position of the object of Desire. If for Miss Rosa "Desire" is expressed as the Demand for the complement that will bring about perfect conjunction in "love", for Sutpen "Desire" is expressed as the Demand for a suitable mate by whom to breed an heir to his dynasty. In Sutpen's terms the "*magic* " of Miss Rosa's "*unkin blood* " is no more than the necessary attribute of a breeding partner.

When without warning, Sutpen confronts Miss Rosa with the "*bald outrageous words* " which, the reader is to discover some eight pages later, constitute the suggestion that "they breed together for test and sample and if it was a boy they would marry" (AA p. 177), Miss Rosa leaves Sut-

pen's Hundred, returning to her former home in Jefferson. It is possible to attribute Miss Rosa's desertion of Sutpen to her outraged Methodist consciousness.[15] Certainly, her narrative is presented from the perspective of a Christian whose nineteenth century Methodist morality would most likely be seriously offended by the baldness of Sutpen's suggestion which is so subversive to Symbolic Order. However, a further dimension could be added to the interpretation of her outrage. Since throughout her narrative Miss Rosa has showed a marked preoccupation with the concept of romantic love, Sutpen's proposal of copulation, like Bon's death, must come as a brutal demystification of the fantasy she had composed. The interpretation of their relationship as coupling necessary to reproduction is to Miss Rosa a very inadequate translation of her vision of sublime union in "the airy space and scope for delirium." Withdrawing from her the identity of "prospective bride",

[15] Various critics express this opinion. Ralph Behrens for example argues,

> "Since his wife Ellen has died during the war, he [Sutpen] proposes to her sister Rosa that she try breeding with him, and if their child is a son, they will be married. Miss Rosa of course refuses, since that proposal is the final and undeniable evidence to her of the absence of all humanistic and moral concern in Sutpen's pursuit of his ambitions." — "Collapse of Dynasty: The Thematic Centre of Absalom, Absalom!" PMLA 89 (1) 1974, p. 27.

Lynn Gartrell Levins argues, "... Thomas Sutpen insulted the Puritan foundation by means of which Rosa Coldfield had weighed and judged her world. Rosa, though a "ghost" for forty-three years, refuses to let the memory of the insult die." — "The Four Narrative Perspectives in Absalom, Absalom!" p. 37.

Sutpen effectively offers her in exchange the unnameable position of "human brood mare." This affront amounts to a refusal to acknowledge that Miss Rosa has either claim to a position in the Symbolic Order, or the power to signify in that order. While her sense of morality may be outraged, I suggest that it is also her final discovery of her indeterminacy and failure to signify in the eyes of the patriarch that causes Miss Rosa to consider her efforts to establish and verify her subjectivity as concluded on "that afternoon in April forty-three years ago" (AA p. 18).

It is only once she has returned to Jefferson and is able to redefine Sutpen as the devil-incarnate that Miss Rosa can interpret her position in relation to Sutpen meaningfully as that of an unfortunate victim of the demonic plan to which her sister Ellen, and the Sutpen children are also prey. From this interpretive distance she is able to "forgive" Sutpen until he commits his final outrage: he dies. Yet again Miss Rosa finds her subjective position and hence her authorial power subverted by the Otherness of reality which contradicts the meaning she had established in her demon myth. If Sutpen were, as she characterizes him, the devil incarnate, he could not have died without bequeathing his demonic powers to an heir. Yet Miss Rosa is not aware of the existence of any heir, since it is in striving to beget a male heir that Sutpen has met his end. If she concedes that he has died heirless however, she thereby denies the credibility of her demon

myth for she concedes that Sutpen is mortal. It is thus the discovery that "There's something in that house ... Something living in it. Hidden in it ..." (AA p. 172), that inspires Miss Rosa with a new belief in the continuing presence of the Devil or Other who gives definition both to herself as victim of demonic intrigue, and to her myth as the tale of the devil incarnate. Thus in the late summer of "twice-bloomed wistaria" she once more returns to her interpretive quest, attempting to establish the "meaning" of the Sutpen mystery, permitting no interruption or interjection from her listener. It is only in the final pages of the text that the outcome of her quest, the conclusion of her myth is revealed.

* * * * *

INCEST, HOMOSEXUALITY, BIGAMY: THE LOGICAL NARRATIVE OF MR COMPSON

Miss Rosa's narrative, related to Quentin during the course of a late summer's afternoon, is followed by that of Mr Compson, related the evening of the same day, while Quentin waits on the gallery after supper for the time he is to fetch Miss Rosa in the Compson buggy and escort her to Sutpen's Hundred to investigate the mysterious presence in the old mansion. In terms of textual arrangement, Miss Rosa's narrative is presented in Chapters One and Five, while the greater part of Mr Compson's is inserted between these two segments in Chapters Two, Three and Four. This sequentiality of the two narratives in the arrange-

ment of story and of discourse, invites comparisons at both these levels. Before focusing then, on Mr Compson's attempts to translate or "read" in rational terms, the irrationality of the Sutpen myth, I shall first pursue this comparison.

Let us consider then, at the level of the discourse, the claim to narrative authority of each narrator, and on the basis of this, the relationship between narrator and narratee. Miss Rosa, as participant in most of the events she relates, can adopt the first person discourse and the authority, of an eye-witness. Furthermore, in terms of the mythical code of Southern chivalry by which antecedence is privileged over subsequence, she, as a sixty-five year old woman, is justified in claiming respect from her twenty year old listener. This, Quentin, with his acquiescent responses of "Yessum" and "No'me" is quite ready to proffer. Thus, in Miss Rosa's segments of narrative, the boundary between narrator as authoritative dispenser of meaning, and narratee as submissive recipient of that meaning, is clearly defined.

Mr Compson, on the other hand, belonging to a generation later than Miss Rosa's cannot claim the authority of eye-witness, but must draw on a variety of informative sources and therefore a variety of narrative perspectives amongst which he, as narrative authority, establishes meaningful connections. As a lawyer, he approaches the activity of narration as a quest after convincing evidence; documenting the sources of his information carefully, he draws

on the prerogative of his profession to supplement the text he derives with rational and logical conjecture.

Like Miss Rosa, Mr Compson derives authority from antecedence in that he is father to his narratee, Quentin. Furthermore, by virtue of his legal training, he also carries the authority of an educated man. Correspondingly, Quentin's respect for his father is manifest both in his reference to him as "sir", and for example, in his action of "half-rising" to receive from Mr Compson the text of the old letter written by Charles Bon to Judith Sutpen during the Civil War. While, then, the hierarchy of opposition between narrator and narratee is still maintained in Mr Compson's narrative, while his discourse invites no more interjection or interpretive contribution from the narratee than does Miss Rosa's, it does constantly draw the narratee's attention to the conjectural and therefore arbitrary nature of its authority. For example, firstly the reader is constantly reminded of the diversity of Mr Compson's sources by interjections such as "I have this from something your grandfather let drop one day" (AA p. 49), or, "And then something happened. Nobody knew what ... and so the tale came through the negroes ..." (AA p. 79). Where he introduces his own conjecture into the narrative, modifiers such as "doubtless," "apparently," "in all probability," warn the reader of the interpretive activity in operation. Another reminder of the hypothetical nature of Mr Compson's discourse, is his frequent use of modal auxiliaries with verbs, for example, "He may even

have known Bon that well by then ... and so would in all probability not change later" (AA p. 91), or "So it must have been Henry who seduced Judith not Bon" (AA p. 99). Occasionally he identifies his statements overtly as his own opinion, for example, "... [Henry] loved grieved and killed, still grieving and, I believe, still loving Bon" (AA p. 97), or "I don't believe it was just to preserve Henry as an ally ..." (AA p. 107).

Occasionally, Mr Compson's conjecture becomes assimilated into his narrative as "fact", for example, describing Bon, Mr Compson overtly indicates his own pleasure in fabulation:

> "... this man whom Henry first saw riding perhaps through the grove at the University on one of the two horses which he kept there or perhaps crossing the campus on foot in the slightly Frenchified cloak and hat which he wore, or perhaps (I like to think this) presented formally to the man reclining in a flowered, almost feminized gown, in a sunny window in his chambers..." (AA p. 95).

Shortly after the overt admission of fabulation "I like to think this," the fabulated material itself becomes assimilated into Mr Compson's account as an "authentic" component of the narrative:

> "... And the very fact that, lounging before them in the outlandish and almost feminine garments of his sybaritic privacy, he professed satiety only increased the amazement and the bitter and hopeless outrage" (AA p. 96).

This kind of assimilation may remind the reader that it is impossible for him to distinguish "fact" from "fabulation" unless such distinctions are made by the narrative authori-

ty, or unless the material is repeated from a different perspective which might disclose its arbitrariness.

Now, at the level of the story, the comparison invited between Mr Compson's narrative and Miss Rosa's demonstrates that while both narrators present the same narrative events, by virtue of the difference of their subjective positions and their narrative discourses, the "truths" which they establish through their narratives are markedly different. To illustrate this, a brief consideration may be given to Miss Rosa's and Mr Compson's respective presentations of Ellen Coldfield, Goodhue Coldfield and Thomas Sutpen.

Ellen Coldfield/Sutpen

The impression of Ellen Coldfield offered by Miss Rosa's narrative is that of a deeply unhappy woman. She is "this Niobe without tears who had conceived to the demon in a kind of nightmare, who even while alive had moved but without life and grieved but without weeping ..." (AA pp. 13-14). The undemonstrative quiescence attributed to Ellen in this description seems the product of a repressed suffering which Miss Rosa assumes to be the unquestionable lot of the demon's wife.

However, Mr Compson's description of Ellen, the "swamp-hatched butterfly" rising "into a perennial bright vacuum of arrested sun" (AA p. 70), interprets her not as undemonstrative so much as vacuous.

What Miss Rosa interprets as the helplessness of an isolated recluse, Mr Compson interprets as selfish irres-

ponsibility, for it is only from him that the reader hears firstly of the condescension and shrieks of "peacock amusement" which Ellen bestows on her impoverished and lonely younger sister (AA p. 71), and secondly of the thoughtless proclamation of an engagement between two young people who have barely had time to become acquainted (AA. p. 103-104).

If Miss Rosa sees Ellen as heroically fighting with Sutpen "for those children's souls on a battleground where she could be supported not only by Heaven but by her own family and people of her own kind" (AA p. 23), Mr Compson interprets her as the frivolous affecter of a matriarchal role which she envisages will complement the social position of her husband. She acts as,

> "... chatelaine to the largest, wife to the wealthiest, mother of the most fortunate ... speaking her bright set meaningless phrases out of the part which she had written for herself, of the duchess peripatetic with property soups and medicines among a soilless and uncompelled peasantry – " (AA p. 69).

Finally, in Miss Rosa's opinion Ellen's death is the outcome of her inability to withstand the forces of corruption with which Sutpen overwhelms her; in Mr Compson's eyes she is indeed overwhelmed by unfortunate circumstances, but her final succumbing to them is the outcome of her own insubstantiality rather than the effect of Sutpen's devilry. The "swamp-hatched butterfly" becomes

> "... the moth caught in a gale and blown against a wall and clinging there beating feebly, not with any particular stubborn clinging to life, not in particular

> pain since it was too light to have struck hard, not even with very much remembrance of the bright vacuum before the gale, but just in bewildered and uncomprehending amazement —" (AA p. 85).

Goodhue Coldfield

Both Miss Rosa and Mr Compson present Goodhue Coldfield in terms of his relationship with Thomas Sutpen. For Miss Rosa this relationship can only be regarded as the devil's inexplicable choice of his first victim:

> "How could he have approached papa, on what grounds; what there could have been besides the common civility of two men meeting on the street, between a man who came from nowhere or dared not tell where and our father; what there could have been between a man like that and papa — a Methodist steward, a merchant who was not rich and who not only could have done nothing under the sun to advance his fortunes or prospects but could by no stretch of the imagination even have owned anything that he would have wanted, even picked up in the road — a man who owned neither land nor slaves except two house servants whom he had freed as soon as he got them, bought them, who neither drank nor hunted nor gambled — (AA p. 20).

For Mr Compson on the other hand, the relationship between Coldfield and Sutpen seems founded chiefly on the respectability which Coldfield can offer Sutpen. When Coldfield, with General Compson, signs Sutpen's bond of release from jail, this, in Mr Compson's opinion is "the best possible moral fumigation which Sutpen could have received at the time in the eyes of his fellow citizens" (AA p. 50). Coldfield according to Mr Compson's account of him, could even be described as covertly similar to Sutpen. While Sutpen aspires towards the ideal of earthly patriarch, directing his energy towards the accumulation of the material wealth

that will guarantee his social respectability and authority, Coldfield aspires towards the ideal of spiritual patriarch, directing his energy towards what he envisages as the accumulation of spiritual capital which will ensure his respectability in a life hereafter. While Sutpen sanctions slavery as an institution which defines his authority and economic power, Coldfield, denouncing slavery nevertheless practises a parsimony which demonstrates his respect for divine providence but which is effectively as repressive as slavery. As Mr Compson recounts,

> Even the two negresses were gone now — whom he had freed as soon as he came into possession of them (through a debt, by the way, not purchase), writing out their papers of freedom which they could not read and putting them on a weekly wage which he held back in full against the discharge of their current market value — and in return for which they had been among the first Jefferson negroes to desert and follow the Yankee troops" (AA p. 84).

According to Mr Compson, Coldfield, like Sutpen, expects the submissive allegiance of his female dependents, refusing to tolerate any manifestation of insubordination; for example, "He refused to permit his sister to come back home to live while her horse-trader husband was in the army ..." (AA p. 81), a refusal that seems based partially on the sister's rebellious action of elopement, and partially on her husband's involvement in a war of which Mr Coldfield disapproves.

On the basis of these similarities, Mr Compson seems to interpret the association between Sutpen and Coldfield as that of like minds, rather than that of demon and prey.

Thomas Sutpen

While Miss Rosa's description of Sutpen's sudden appearance with no other possessions but his horse and two pistols, evokes the stereotype of the Outlaw, Mr Compson colours such stereotyping with irony. For example, describing the speculations of the Jefferson townsfolk on Sutpen's mysterious acquisition of the sumptuous furnishings for his mansion he comments wryly,

> "... doubtless this time there were more men than women even who pictured him during this absence with a handkerchief over his face and the two pistol barrels glinting beneath the candelabra of a steamboat's saloon, even if no worse: if not something performed in the lurking dark of a muddy landing and with a knife from behind" (AA p. 44).

These allusions to the somewhat obvious characteristics of the "bare-faced hold-up" and the "attack by the cut-throat," suggests an ironic mimicry of the hushed speculation amongst gossips.

Miss Rosa's account of Sutpen as anti-hero and diabolic orchestrator of mysterious intrigues, has been compared to the genre of Gothic novel, while in Mr Compson's narrative the influences of Greek tragecy have been noted.[16] A significant point that can be made from this observation is that while for Miss Rosa, Sutpen himself is the untranslatable devilish Other of the Symbolic Order of the deep

[16] The identification of various genre characteristics is made very clearly by Lynn Gartrell Levins, and is supported in the argument of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. See Levins, "The Four Narrative Perspectives in Absalom, Absalom!" p. 35-39; Rimmon-Kenan, "From Reproduction to Production," p. 9.

South, the source of dark mystery of which his wife and family are victims, to Mr Compson, Sutpen, who attempts to establish a place for himself in the Symbolic Order of the deep South, is himself a victim of the Other, the force of a "Fate" which is beyond his power to control. In Mr Compson's words:

> "... while he was still playing the scene to the audience, behind him Fate, destiny, retribution, irony – the stage manager, call him what you will – was already striking the set and dragging on the synthetic and spurious shadows and shapes of the next one"
> (AA pp. 72-73).

These contrasting interpretations of Sutpen express a disparity in the broader epistemological views of the two narrators. While Miss Rosa's mythical narrative implies a world in which man, as God's emissary contends with the opposing forces of the Devil, Mr Compson's narrative of reason implies a world in which man as a rational, logical establisher of meaning, contends with the power of the irrational.

These discrepancies in interpretation raise the following issues at the level of the narrative discourse: firstly, if the reader/narratee is presented with various interpretations of the same set of events, if no narrative position is presented as more privileged than any other, is there any indication in the text of Absalom, Absalom! that "the truth" may ever be determined, and if so, what is the nature of that "truth"?

Although the quest for truth in Absalom, Absalom!

is sometimes treated as a matter of judging the reliability of the various narrators, it would seem that the issues raised by this text are more radical than the issue of narrative reliability. To question a narrator's reliability is to question his presentation and interpretation of the truth rather than to question the existence of truth per se. In Absalom, Absalom! the reader is not so much invited to ask "which narrator tells the truth?" as "Can anyone ever tell the truth?"

With these issues in mind, let us now consider the interpretation that Mr Compson gives to the mysterious events which take place at Sutpen's Hundred fifty years before his narration.

Translating the Untranslatable: Mr Compson's Quest for Reason in the Story of Thomas Sutpen

While Miss Rosa, presenting the Sutpen story as a myth of the devil incarnate, treats the enigmas of this myth as the unaccountable dark mysteries of devilry, Mr Compson attempts to solve these mysteries by logical deduction. In so doing he isolates the figure of Charles Bon as the enigmatic focal point.

According to Mr Compson's interpretation, Charles Bon appears as the antithesis or dark Other of Henry Sutpen. While Henry is apparently the first-born Sutpen son and thereby heir to the Sutpen dynasty, Bon is described as "phoenix-like, fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time" (AA p. 74). While the speci-

ficity of Henry's place in the Symbolic Order of Yoknapatawpha County stems from his father's success in establishing the Sutpen estate as the basis for a dynasty, the indeterminacy of Bon's place in the Symbolic Order is the effect of his absent father's anonymity. Ironically however, the appearance of Bon as the Other, the outsider, has the effect of challenging the very assurance of Thomas and Henry Sutpen's positions in the Symbolic Order, for Bon is "a man with an ease of manner and a swaggering gallant air in comparison with which Sutpen's pompous arrogance was clumsy bluff and Henry actually a hobble-de-hoy" (AA pp. 74). It is Bon's very indeterminate identity that stands as a reminder of that absence or vacuum from which Thomas Sutpen's commanding patriarchal presence arose, "He [Bon] came into that isolated puritan country household almost like Sutpen himself came into Jefferson: apparently complete, without background or past or childhood ... completely enigmatic" (AA p. 93).

The mystery with which Mr Compson's interpretation is preoccupied is Thomas Sutpen's veto of Judith and Bon's marriage, Henry's consequent renunciation of his rights as Sutpen's heir and finally Henry's murder of Bon. As Peter Brooks observes, Mr Compson's narrative centres on the horizontal relationships of courtship and siblingship: the conjectured relationships between Henry and Bon, between Henry and Judith and between Judith and Bon.[17]

[17] P. Brooks, p. 259.

Between Henry and Bon, Mr Compson conjectures a relationship of love founded on the country boy's admiration for the sophisticated maturity of his friend. While Henry is "the provincial, the clown, almost, given to instinctive and violent action" (AA p. 96), Bon is his sophisticated, indolent antithesis:

> "... — this man whom Henry first saw riding perhaps through the grove at the University on one of the two horses which he kept there or perhaps crossing the campus on foot in the slightly Frenchified cloak and hat which he wore, or perhaps (I like to think this) presented formally to the man reclining in a flowered, almost feminized gown, in a sunny window in his chambers — this man handsome elegant and even catlike and too old to be where he was, too old not in years but in experience, with some tangible effluvium of knowledge, surfeit: of actions done and satiations plumbed and pleasures exhausted and even forgotten. So that he must have appeared, not only to Henry but to the entire undergraduate body of that small new provincial college, as a source not of envy, ... but of despair. ... Yes, he loved Bon, who seduced him as surely as he seduced Judith — the country boy born and bred who, with the five or six others of that small undergraduate body composed of other planters' sons whom Bon permitted to become intimate with him, who aped his clothing and manner and (to the extent which they were able) his very manner of living, looked upon Bon as though he were a hero out of some adolescent Arabian Nights"(AA pp. 95-96).

As a product of a culture foreign to Henry Sutpen — the French culture of Louisiana and specifically, of New Orleans — Bon, in Mr Compson's view, is likely to have appeared fascinating to Henry. His exoticism, suggested in his identification as a "hero out of some adolescent Arabian Nights" with a "Frenchified cloak and hat"; his effeminacy suggested in the details of the "flowered, almost feminized gown"; his "satiations plumbed" which the reader is to

discover include the maintenance of an octoroon mistress and her child, all contribute to identify him as the embodiment of the "Otherness" forbidden to Henry as heir to the ideal of white land-owning patriarchy. Clearly evident in Bon are the indolence, effeminacy and fraternization with negroes, which challenge the strictness of the boundaries of difference by which the violent action, male chauvinism and slavery of the plantation owner are defined. Effectively Bon is the representative of the Otherness which Henry finds lacking in himself and therefore Desires. Only later, in Quentin and Shreve's interpretation, is the converse conclusion drawn that Henry, identified as the first-born and heir to his father, embodies the Otherness of recognized identity which Bon in his turn, lacks and Desires.

Having hypothesized that a particularly close relationship existed between Bon and Henry, Mr Compson then argues that a similarly close relationship existed between Henry and Judith, "the town knew that between Henry and Judith there had been a relationship closer than the traditional loyalty of brother and sister even; a curious relationship: something of that fierce impersonal rivalry between two cadets in a crack regiment ..." (AA pp. 79-80). He proposes this closeness as a possible justification for the engagement between Judith and Bon after so brief a courtship,

> "So it must have been Henry who seduced Judith, not Bon: seduced her along with himself from that distance

> between Oxford and Sutpen's Hundred, between herself and the man whom she had not even seen yet, as though by means of that telepathy with which as children they seemed at times to anticipate one anothers' actions (AA p. 99).

It is on the basis of this apparent closeness, that Mr Compson describes Judith and Henry as mutually attracted to Bon: they constitute "the single personality with two bodies both of which had been seduced almost simultaneously by a man whom at the time Judith had never even seen" (AA pp. 91-92).

While Judith's union with Bon would appear to be pef-fectly acceptable to society, Henry's union with Bon would be clearly taboo since in a patriarchal society it would constitute an excess of manhood or an excess of "sameness" where there should be "difference". Judith is therefore "the one with hope, even though unconscious, of making the image [of Bon] hers through possession," while Henry is "the other with the knowledge of the insurmountable barrier which the similarity of gender hopelessly inter-vened ..." (AA p. 95).

On the basis of the closeness between Judith and Henry, Mr Compson then introduces the suggestion that through her relationship with Bon, Judith might be interpreted as taking the role of mediator who makes possible the vicari-ous consummation of the homosexual affection between Bon and Henry:

> "Bon not only loved Judith after his fashion but he loved Henry too and I believe in a deeper sense than merely his fashion. Perhaps in his fatalism he loved

> Henry the better of the two, seeing perhaps in the sister merely the shadow, the woman vessel with which to consummate the love whose actual object was the youth ..." (AA pp. 107-108).

On the other hand, it is equally possible to hypothesize that Bon, by virtue of his attraction for both brother and sister is the mediator who makes possible the vicarious consummation of an incestuous affection between Judith and Henry:

> "In fact, perhaps this is the pure and perfect incest: the brother realizing that the sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband;" (AA p. 96).

Like homosexuality, the taboo of incest entails the threat of too much "sameness" within an order of difference. While in incest the excess of "sameness", being genetic, is liable to threaten the healthy continuance of the familial line by perpetuating weaknesses in the genetic strains, in homosexuality, the excess of "sameness" being sexual fails to produce progeny at all.

However for all the covert suitability to the hypothesized passions of the three young people which Mr Compson deduces in the marriage between Charles Bon and Judith Sutpen, it is nevertheless forbidden by Thomas Sutpen. The only possible reason that Mr Compson can proffer for this veto is the existence of an unorthodox marriage contract between Bon and his octoroon mistress whom he keeps in New Orleans. Although Mr Compson goes to considerable

effort to visualize how the taboo of bigamy might in Henry's eyes outweigh the value of the marriage in which the forbidden but desired satisfaction of both homosexuality and incest stand to be successfully achieved, he is finally forced to admit that the carefully constructed logic of his narrative is unconvincing. It might be argued that bigamy or the taking of two wives is taboo in a patriarchal dynastic society since the duplication of the dynastic line which it implies might constitute a threat to the order of linearity which the laws of succession aim to preserve. Furthermore, it might be argued that, although miscegenation was an accepted practice in Louisiana and other French-influenced Gulf port communities, it was treated as strictly taboo in the interior Anglicized colonies.[18] Yet, if Henry idolized Bon in the manner in which Mr Compson describes, it would seem that he would be more likely

[18] In his sociological study of slavery and emancipation in the Southern States, Ira Berlin describes this difference in attitudes towards miscegenation as follows: "Early French adventurers in this region [Louisiana and the Gulf ports], unlike English mainland colonists, did not settle with their families, and the preponderantly male population quickly formed liaisons with black slave women. By the middle of the eighteenth century, such matches had become so commonplace that whites customarily recognized their mulatto children, and some provided for their upbringing and education. Few white men thought it necessary to hide what English mainland colonists called "shameful" and "unnatural" relations. Although the children of these mixed racial unions followed the status of their mother, a liberal manumission policy encouraged masters to free their black mistresses and their light-skinned children." — Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974) p. 109.

to accept, than to reject, the alien morality, of his friend.[19] Even if Henry was shocked by the discovery of Bon's first marriage, murder seems an unconvincingly extreme measure of repudiation for him to have adopted.

Finally then in spite of the care and interpretive effort he expends in conflating the evidence of his various sources, Mr Compson's narrative fails to resolve the enigma of why Sutpen vetoed the marriage of Judith and Bon, why Henry denounced his father and his birthright in support of Bon only to murder his friend later. As Mr Compson himself observes,

> It's just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they dont explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanscrit or Chocktaw; ... Yes, Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of them. They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost

[19] Again, this argument could be supported by evidence that in the "real" world of the South, such liaisons were not unheard of:

"Lower-class whites were probably most likely to reject Southern sexual standards, but the white elite did so as well. Some wealthy planters and merchants took black mistresses. Most doubtless kept these relations discreetly out of view, but some flaunted their illicit conduct. 'There are large numbers of our young men and several of our merchants,' wrote a North Carolina planter from New Bern, 'who have negro wives or "misses" and keep them openly, raising up families of mulattoes.' Such mixed racial unions were even more commonplace in the Lower South." — I. Berlin, p. 266.

> indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs"
> (AA pp. 100-101).

Earlier, the discrepancies of interpretation between Miss Rosa's narrative and Mr Compson's raised the issue of whether it is possible for the reader – given several perspectives of an event none of which is identified by the text as more privileged than another – to determine "the truth". Now the question becomes more radical: given a series of events, is it possible for the reader, or more generally the linguistic subject, to establish within them a pattern of meaning at all? As Peter Brooks expresses it,

> ... how can narrative know what happened, and make sense of the motives of events? And if it cannot, what happens to lines of descent, to the transmission of knowledge and wisdom, and to History itself? Is History finally simply a "bloody mischancing of human affairs"? If, for Barthes, the resolution of all enigmas coincides with the full and final predication of the narrative sentence, Mr Compson here appears to question the possibility of ever finding a predicate: the subjects – the proper names – are there, but they refuse to accede to meaning[20]

Thus far then the reader has followed two versions of the Sutpen story. The first, a myth describing the

[20] P. Brooks, p. 251. It may be noted that while Brooks refers the reader to Roland Barthes' text S/Z at an earlier stage of his article, he offers no page references. I suggest that the above reference to Barthes applies to p. 209 ff of S/Z, trans. Richard Miller, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

incarnation of the devil and his activities amongst the men of Yoknapatawpha County is unable to interpret the enigmas of the myth as anything more than unaccountable, devilish machinations. The second version, confronting these enigmas by systematic, logical deduction, fails to produce any more convincing interpretive "truth" than the earlier version.

It is only with the transformation of the narrative process itself in the interpretation of Quentin and Shreve that the possibility of "predicating the narrative sentence" begins to appear accessible.

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THE RECOGNITION OF OTHERNESS IN THE NARRATIVE OF QUENTIN AND SHREVE

While the narration of the first five chapters of Absalom, Absalom! takes place on an afternoon and evening in the late summer of a dusty Mississippi September, Chapter Six marks a change to the context of a winter's evening in January in the snowy Northern state of Massachusetts. With this change in the spatial and temporal location of the narrative, Quentin's status as narratee also changes to that of narrator. While in the earlier contexts the authoritative status of the narrators was reinforced by the hierarchy of authority evident in the Southern Symbolic Order, in the latter context the narrator's authority is less clearly defined, for both narrator and narratee are

of the same age and the same social identity, being first-year students at Harvard. Although initially Quentin's narrative authority depends on his Southern birthright and his consequent knowledge of Southern history, Southern conventions and most particularly the story of Sutpen, it is not long before his authority is challenged by Shreve.

It is evident from Shreve's interjections that he, as a Northerner, not only finds Quentin's story strange, but he also finds the strictly hierarchical arrangement of difference manifested in the Symbolic Order of deep Southern Yoknapatawpha County unfamiliar. For example, his references to Miss Rosa Coldfield as "this old gal" and "this old dame" (AA p. 176) illustrate his unawareness of the Southern mystification of "ladies" as the fragile other according to which the authoritative "gentleman" is defined. Similarly he is unfamiliar with the rigid class distinction which is manifest for example, in the particularity of the signifier attributed to the impoverished white man: "What is it? the word? White what? — Yes trash" (AA p. 181 emphasis added).

Shreve's incredulity towards the Southern Symbolic Order and the Sutpen story has the effect of subverting what Quentin regarded as "the norm", presenting it instead as "the Other," the strangeness of which Shreve strives to reduce through his own interpretive effort. His incredulity also has the effect of subverting the interpretations of Sutpen offered in Miss Rosa's and Mr Compson's respective narratives. Miss Rosa's destructive demon for example,

becomes a figure of comedy in Shreve's hands, "this Faustus, this demon, this Beelzebub ... who hid horns and tail beneath human raiment and a beaver hat" (AA p. 178). Mr Compson's account on the other hand seems to Shreve the incredible story of a man who repeatedly undermines the very objectives he apparently sets out to achieve. The effect of Thomas Sutpen as mystery, then, once more repeats itself not only in Quentin, but also in Shreve. Yet if the latter is to pursue his Desire to find "the truth" or narrate the story himself, he implicitly thereby requires Quentin to relinquish the role of narrator or "author of the truth" and take instead the place of narratee, "recipient of the truth." This Quentin is loath to do since he has not yet resolved for himself the failure of meaning in the Sutpen myth. For him, Shreve threatens to take the place of his authorial father, casting him once again in the role of acquiescent son:

> *"Yes. I have heard too much, I have been told too much; I have had to listen too much, too long* thinking *Yes, Shreve sounds almost exactly like father ..."* (AA p. 207).

Initially then, the narrative of Quentin and Shreve is generated by their respective determination to rewrite the Sutpen history in order to resolve the questions it poses. One might see in this narrative rivalry between Northerner and Southerner a textual re-enactment of the historical conflict between North and South. Yet if initially the two young men are rivals, this relationship of opposition is gradually transformed as their narrative

progresses.

Charles Etienne St Valery Bon: the Problem of Miscegeny

The narrative of Quentin and Shreve appears to have been initiated by Mr Compson's letter announcing the death of Miss Rosa Coldfield. The letter re-evokes in Quentin's memory his journey with Miss Rosa to Sutpen's Hundred the previous September night. Quentin's visualization of the journey through the suffocating summer dust suggests a return to origins, the dust standing as an obscuring veil guarding a mystery whose revelation threatens to be overwhelming rather than illuminating, "the dust-cloud moving on, enclosing them with not threat exactly but maybe warning, bland, almost friendly warning ..." (AA p. 175). However, before Quentin's reminiscence progresses to the point of revelation, it is interrupted and suspended by Shreve's interjection, re-iterating and attempting to make sense of the story that Quentin has told him up to this point.

As Shreve re-interprets Quentin's story, he introduces the reader to new portions of narrative material, an important segment being the account of events at Sutpen's Hundred after Thomas Sutpen's death in 1869. This account is provoked by the spectacle of the tombstones which Quentin and Mr Compson encounter during a quail-shooting expedition near the derelict Sutpen mansion – "authoritative texts which yet require decipherment."[21]

[21] P. Brooks, p. 257.

The tombstone or text which requires particular decipherment is that of Charles Etienne Saint Valery Bon. As Mr Compson recounts to Quentin how Charles Etienne, the sone of Charles Bon and his octaroon mistress came to be buried at Sutpen's Hundred, several unanswered questions arise from the narrative: for example, why did Judith and Clytie feel responsible for this little boy whose only apparent connection with them appears to have been that he was the son of the man whom their brother had murdered? Did they feel responsible as the murderer's sisters, or did Judith perhaps regard the child as her surrogate son since he was the child of her dead suitor? Why did the two women treat the boy so protectively?

Besides raising these questions which are only resolved towards the end of the novel, this segment of narrative focuses on an issue which has been implicit but understated in the preceding narrative material, namely, the question of whether the progeny of miscegenation can be regarded as having a place within the Symbolic Order of the mythical deep South and if so what this place might be.

For the reader, Charles Etienne Bon, like his father, Charles Bon, is presented as an enigmatic, "Other-worldly" child, having "had no childhood ... as if he had not been human born, but instead created without agency of man or agony of woman and orphaned by no human being" (AA p. 196). As a French-speaking, part-negro he clearly does not belong to the society of Jefferson. That the townsfolk regard him as "Other" or beyond the Law of their society is sug-

gested by their speculations that he is the illegitimate son of Judith Sutpen and Charles Bon, or even that he is the offspring of the incestuous union of Clytie and Thomas Sutpen (AA p. 201).

The indeterminacy of his status in the Sutpen home is illustrated in the position of his trundle bed between Judith's more elevated bed and Clytie's pallet – a position from which he might have felt the two women thinking,

> *"You are not up here in this bed with me, where through no fault nor willing of your own you should be, and you are not down here on this pallet floor with me, where through no fault nor willing of your own you must and will be, not through any fault or willing of our own who would not what we cannot"* (AA p. 198).

On a wider scale, the problem of identification with which he presents the Law of the Symbolic Order governing Yoknapatawpha County is particularly clearly illustrated in the Jefferson courthouse when he is being indicted for disturbing the peace. The speech of the judge, Justice Jim Hamblett, runs as follows:

> "At this time, while our country is struggling to rise from beneath the iron heel of a tyrant oppressor, when the very future of the South as a place bearable for our women and children to live in depends on the labor of our own hands, when the tools which we have to use, to depend on, are the pride and integrity and forbearance of black men and the pride and integrity and forbearance of white; that you, I say, a white man, a white –" and your grandfather trying to reach him, stop him, trying to push through the crowd, saying "Jim. Jim. *Jim*!" and it already too late, as if Hamblett's own voice had waked him at last or as if someone had snapped his fingers under his nose and waked him, he looking at the prisoner now but saying "white" again even while his voice died away as if the order to stop the voice had been shocked into short circuit, and every face in the room turned toward the prisoner as

> Hamblett cried, "*What are you? Who and where did you come from?* (AA p. 203).

While Hamblett identifies the source of order in the South as "the pride and integrity and forbearance of black men and the pride and integrity and forbearance of white," this binary opposition fails to recognize the identity of one who is neither "black" nor "white" and is therefore an undecidable within the Symbolic Order.[22] In other words, when Hamblet asks "What are you?" there can be no satisfactory answer in terms of the opposition "black" or "white", for Charles Etienne can only be identified as "white" if his equal claim to blackness, manifest in his tawny skin colour is repressed and conversely, he can only be identified as "black" if his apparently "white" appearance is repressed. This undecidability which Charles Etienne embodies threatens the meaningfulness of the binary opposition black/white, since he represents both an excess of meaning which neither term can accommodate, and paradoxically, a deficiency of meaning since he conforms fully to neither description. Effectively this status is the same as that of Miss Rosa Coldfield: the status of an overdetermined signified.

[22] Ira Berlin describes the problem which "mixed-bloods" presented to the Symbolic Order of the "real" South which recognized only "black" and "white":

> "... hostility was reflected in the increased difficulties light-skinned free Negroes encountered when trying to slip under the color line. Many whites were no longer willing to tolerate the silent passage of mixed-bloods into the white caste. In Virginia, the old mixed-blood law, which had permitted hundreds of fair-skinned persons of African ancestry to prove they were less than one-quarter black in court and thereby escape their legal disabilities, met increased opposition. ...The mayor [of Richmond] grumbled

At the root of Charles Etienne's problem would seem to be the taboo of "miscegeny".[23] Although this taboo might be treated as an equivalent to the incest taboo, there is a marked dissimilarity between the two prohibitions. While incest, as already discussed, prohibits the production of too much "sameness" thereby forestalling the weakening of genetic strains and the subsequent natural culling of such weakness, miscegeny prohibits the mixture of difference that would weaken the distinction between black and white. The fact that no natural elimination process reinforces such a veto, the fact that the progeny of black and white union manifest no perpetual congenital malfunction indicates that this law is based on the need to sustain the status quo of the Symbolic Order rather than on the need to forestall weakening of the organism itself. The taboo against mixed marriage would therefore seem to be based on the over-differentiation of black and white which, creating too much difference, "sets up a perpetual slippage of meaning where ... one cannot find any points of fixity in the signifying chain."[24]

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that the mixed-blood law befogged caste lines and undermined white supremacy. ... There were only two castes, white and black, stormed one Richmond journal. If the legislature wanted to make a third, it should prescribe their status; otherwise, mixed-bloods would soon 'become governers, judges, jurors, soldiers, or lawyers.'" — Berlin, p. 365, my emphasis.

[23] As already indicated in footnote 18 this taboo prevailed in the English-influenced states of the "real" South — of which Yoknapatawpha is a fictional representation — although in the French-influenced states, attitudes towards miscegenation were less strict.

[24] P. Brooks, p. 266.

Although in the post-war South as presented in Absalom, Absalom! the hierarchical arrangement of difference which privileges white over black has theoretically been waived, it is evident from Charles Etienne's position that free integration of the two groups is by no means accepted. While the fraternization of a part-negro, but apparently white, man with negroes is considered cause for suspicion amongst both negroes and whites, the same man's claim to the status of white is likely to be considered presumptuous. Thus Charles Etienne Bon becomes the scapegoat or outcast who bears the failure of his Symbolic Order to account for the excess of meaning which is the effect of its over-differentiative laws.

Thomas Sutpen's Design:
the Quest for Autonomous Subjectivity in a Closed Text

A vital portion of narrative material which has been withheld and is now recounted in Quentin and Shreve's dialogue is the story of Thomas Sutpen before his arrival in Yoknapatawpha County. Originally narrated by Sutpen himself to Quentin's grandfather, General Compson, during their hunt for the runaway French architect, who had been directing the building of Sutpen's mansion, the story is now reiterated by Quentin.

The context in which Sutpen's history begins seems characterized by a lack of differentiation — translated into Lacanian terminology, a context of "pre-linguistic" and therefore "presubjective" nondifferentiation.[25]

This environment, being unnamed at the time of Sutpen's childhood, is extrinsic to any clearly defined Symbolic Order – a point foregrounded by Quentin and Shreve's debate on its identity:

> "Because he was born in West Virginia, in the mountains – " ("Not in West Virginia," Shreve said. – "What?" Quentin said. "Not in West Virginia," Shreve said. "Because if he was twenty-five years old in Mississippi in 1833, he was born in 1808. And there wasn't any West Virginia in 1808 because – " "All right," Quentin said. "– West Virginia wasn't admitted –" "All right all right," Quentin said. "– into the United States until –" "All right all right all right," Quentin said.) " – he was born where what few other people he knew lived in log cabins boiling with children like the one he was born in ... where he had never even heard of, never imagined, a place, a land divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but ride over it on fine horses or sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them;..." (AA pp. 220-221).

Only when the Sutpen family moved from their mountain home back to the coast whence they had originally come, does the young Sutpen become gradually aware of his surroundings as differentiated and systematized:

> "... the country flattened out now with good roads and fields and niggers working the fields while white men sat fine horses and watched them, and more fine horses and men in fine clothes, with a different look in the face from mountain men about the taverns where the old man was not even allowed to come in by the front door ... He had learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white

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[25] This view is corroborated by John T. Matthews who writes, "When Sutpen tells his story to General Compson, he looks back on his mountain childhood as a place beyond social differentiation, moral ambiguity, and complexity" – The Play of Faulkner's Language (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982) p. 154.

> men, not to be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out of the room" (AA pp. 225-226).

"Difference", Sutpen must discover, is not only defined in physical terms at the level of the signified, but also at the level of the signifier according to laws of a Symbolic Order which is as yet unfamiliar to him. It is only when he is rebuffed by the negro butler at the Pettibone mansion that Sutpen realizes that this system of "difference" has been translated into a hierarchy within which his position is barely worthy of recognition.[26] It is this denial of recognition that shapes Sutpen's experience: neither he, nor the message he conveys, nor his father as sender of the message is recognized as having a significance that can cancel even momentarily, the lowliness of their status in the hierarchy. Since he is barely recognized within this Symbolic Order, Sutpen realises that correspondingly, his power to signify or to convey signification, is likewise dismissed:

[26] Peter Brooks identifies Sutpen's experience at the Pettibone mansion as the initial discovery of difference:

"In this moment of barred passage, Sutpen discovers the existence of difference: difference as an abstract and formal property which takes precedence over all else – since, for instance, it is more important than the content of the message he was supposed to deliver. Good and evil, morality, social position, worth are not substantial, but belong rather to the order of the signifier" (p. 260).

It would seem however from for example, the last passage quoted on the previous page of this thesis (p. 194) ending above, that Sutpen's discovery of difference per se has been more gradual than Brooks' interpretation would imply.

> "*I went up to that door for that nigger to tell me never to come to that front door again and I not only wasn't doing any good to him by telling it or any harm to him by not telling it, there aint any good or harm either in the living world that I can do to him*" (AA pp. 237-238).

Through a process of tortuous deduction, Sutpen comes to the conclusion that the power to control the hierarchy of difference, which he visualizes to be the power that Pettibone possesses, depends on the acquisition of property, "You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with" (AA p. 238). He therefore conceives of a "design" to establish himself as an autonomous authority by acquiring this property. As his subsequent experience implies, Sutpen's mistake lies in his assumption that the opposite or "other" of his own insignificance and helplessness is absolute power, absolute autonomy. It is his naïve belief in the possibility of attaining incontrovertible authority that Quentin describes as,

> "... that innocence which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out" (AA p. 263).

This "innocence" prevents Sutpen from taking into account the constant play of difference or Otherness which has the potential to subvert the order of meaning over which the subject may believe he has full control. As soon as he sets about accomplishing his design, he is faced with manifestations of the unexpected Other. Travelling to the West Indies which, he had learned during a period of

erratic schooling, was where a poor man could become rich "so long as that man was clever and courageous" (AA p. 242), he is confronted first by linguistic Otherness. He discovers that "all people did not speak the same tongue and realized that he would not only need courage and skill, he would have to learn to speak a new language, else that design to which he had dedicated himself would die still-born" (AA p. 248). On this occasion Sutpen succeeds in reducing the strangeness of the Other by incorporating it into his design: he apparently learns both French and the patois necessary to communicate with the Negro slaves on Haiti. Sometimes however he is forced to repress Otherness when it threatens to subvert the Symbolic Order on which his design is founded. One of the initial illustrations of this is his participation in the suppression of the slave uprising which occurs on the sugar plantation where he holds the position of overseer. Identifying himself with the white man's law and the authoritative position of the French planter, Sutpen fights with the latter and his daughter in their barricaded homestead. When the water supply is exhausted on the eighth night of the siege, Sutpen subdues the uprising singlehanded. Since he does not explain how he performs this suppression Quentin, narrating the story, can only establish the method by conjecture:

> "Not how he did it. He didn't tell that either, that of no moment to the story either; he just put the musket down and had someone unbar the door and then bar it behind him, and walked out into the darkness and subdued them, maybe by yelling louder, maybe by standing, bearing more than they believed any bones

> and flesh could or should (should, yes: that would be the terrible thing: to find flesh to stand more than flesh should be asked to stand); maybe at last they themselves turning in horror and fleeing from the white arms and legs shaped like theirs and from which blood could be made to spurt and flow as it could from theirs and containing an indomitable spirit which should have come from the same primary fire which theirs came from but which could not have, could not possibly have" (AA p. 254).

It seems that on this occasion, Sutpen's unwavering dedication to the advancement of his design, his oblivion to the questionability of the law on which that design and its advancement depends, or the limitations of his right and power to impose that law give him the commanding presence of a god. It is this presence, admitting to no weakness or lack, that Quentin visualizes would determine Sutpen's victory.

As a reward for his achievement of quelling the uprising, Sutpen receives the hand of the planter's daughter in marriage. At this point his story is interrupted by the capture of the runaway architect and it is only thirty years later, when his design has apparently failed that he turns to General Compson once more and, attempting to account for the failure of the design, recounts the rest of the story.

While at the level of the story the topic under discussion is Sutpen's quest after the ideal of incontrovertible authority, at the level of the discourse the related issue of narrative authority is raised by Shreve's impatient interjection as Quentin introduces the second instalment of Sutpen's biography:

> "Don't say it's just me that sounds like your old man," Shreve said. "But go on. Sutpen's children. Go on" (AA p. 261).

This reverberation of his own earlier accusation stimulates in Quentin the following consideration of the nature of narrative identity:

> *Yes. Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripple moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm*
> (AA p. 261).

It seems that what Quentin establishes here is an analogy between water and language; between the chain of transmission of disturbance as a ripple-effect from pool to pool and the chain of transmission of mystery as a reading effect from reader to reader.

Just as a series of pools are connected by "a narrow umbilical water-cord," that is the common medium whereby both communication and difference – "different temperature", "different molecularity" and so on – between pools is established, so language is the common medium whereby linguistic subjects are both connected to, but differentiated from, each other. Just as the ripples produced in one pool by the stimulus of a pebble are communicated through the medium of the water thereby disturbing all the surfaces of the

other pools, so the response or effect produced in one linguistic subject or reader by a "disturbance" in the order of meaning may be communicated to other linguistic subjects or readers through the medium of language, as narrative. In language, each subjective identity is therefore established by its difference from others manifest in differing responses to the same stimulus; responses which are expressed through language. Thus Quentin elaborates,

> *Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us* (AA pp. 261-262).

In other words, one might say that Mr Compson's identity is established as father and narrator by virtue of his difference from Quentin as his son and listener.[27] Similarly, Shreve is constituted as the Northerner, the disinterested listener, by virtue of the common ties of Southern birthright and kinship of Quentin and Mr Compson as narrators. Furthermore, it is only through the narratives

[27] Interesting in this connection is John T. Irwin's comment on the relation between father and son during his discussion of Faulkner's The Fable:

> "... the father and the son, through their very opposition, mutually constitute one another, define one another, indeed, exist in and by one another through that opposition – that opposition between a real world of social order achieved by authority at the expense of any given individual and ideal world of individual worth, of the uniqueness and sacredness of every person, a world whose highest expression is the hope of personal immortality guaranteed by Christ's death" – Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975 rpt 1980) p. 139.

of Quention and Mr Compson that Shreve has the opportunity to define himself in the subjective position which his own interpretation of their story demands. On the other hand, it is only because he has listeners, Quentin and later Shreve, that Mr Compson's place as preceding narrator is defined. Finally, it is the name "Thomas Sutpen", the enigmatic sign of "truth" that is constantly deferred, which constitutes "*all of us*" who attempt to arrest that deferment through the activity of interpretation and thereby constitute ourselves in the activity of our writing/speaking.

If Quentin expresses here an appreciation of alterity as the basis of "identity", it seems to be this appreciation which is lacking from the consciousness of Thomas Sutpen. Because he fails to acknowledge his own authority or subjective position as a product of difference, because he fails to recognize that he can never achieve autonomous subjectivity but must always depend on the Other for the definition of his subjective position, because he can never fully repress or fully control the play of difference, Sutpen finds his design repeatedly frustrated.[28]

The Return of the Other as Subversion of Order

It is the repeated frustration of his design that

[28] As T.H. Adamovski argues, "Sutpen is seeking, through his Design, to be autonomous, 'more than a man in a world of men,' ... The novel records the ultimate failure of this passion to be a life in control of itself." — T.H. Adamovski, "Children of the Idea: Heroes and Family Romances in Absalom, Absalom!" Mosaic 10, 1(1976) pp. 116-117.

Sutpen describes to General Compson during the war when he returns to Jefferson briefly, to deposit the tombstones at Sutpen's Hundred. The first insurmountable obstacle he had encountered was the discovery that neither his wife – the daughter of the French sugar planter and his ostensibly Spanish wife – nor his first-born son, was "adjunctive to the forwarding of the design" (AA p. 262). While he had entered into the marriage in good faith, he explains that the planter and his daughter had,

> "... deliberately withheld from me the one fact which I have reason to know they were aware would have caused me to decline the entire matter, otherwise they would not have withheld it from me – a fact which I did not learn until after my son was born. And even then I did not act hastily. ... I merely explained how this new fact rendered it impossible that this woman and child be incorporated in my design, ..." (AA p. 264).

What the "one fact" was, Sutpen never reveals to General Compson; nevertheless it causes Sutpen to resign all claim to the property he had acquired on Haiti. Leaving his wife a wealthy woman, he returns to the North American mainland to begin his design anew. Firmly believing that if he does his wife and child an injustice by abandoning them, he absolves himself from guilt by leaving them well provided for, Sutpen is baffled when, years later, the supposedly closed issue of this first marriage presents itself again. It seems that the source of his baffleMent lies in his failure to see that the resolution of a problem can never be final or indisputable, but only ever amounts to a conventional agreement between the parties concerned

to regard it as resolved. This conventional agreement is therefore perpetually open to revision by either party. If Sutpen believes that he has resolved the problem of his first marriage which represented a difference or Otherness that threatened his design, he now discovers that his resolution was by no means final, as the recurrence of the problem indicates.

That Charles Bon is Sutpen's repudiated, but re-emergent son, is deduced by Quentin after his journey to Sutpen's Hundred with Miss Rosa Coldfield. I shall return to this segment of narrative shortly. For Sutpen, the unexpected appearance of his first-born son presents him with an irresolvable problem:

> "... either I destroy my design with my own hand, which will happen if I am forced to play my last trump card, or do nothing, let matters take the course which I know they will take and see my design complete itself quite normally and naturally and successfully to the public eye, yet to my own in such fashion as to be a mockery and a betrayal of that little boy who approached that door fifty years ago and was turned away, for whose vindication the whole plan was conceived and carried forward to the moment of this choice, this second choice devolving out of the first one which in its turn was forced on me as the result of an agreement ..." (AA p. 274).

These two choices with which Sutpen is faced are distinguishable by the contrasting attitudes to difference which they respectively demand of him. The rebuff faced by "that little boy who approached that door fifty years ago" arose from the refusal of the authority which he confronted, the white property-owning patriarch implicit in the figure of the Negro butler, to recognize the significative power

of one who by his difference — his youth and his poverty — defined that authority. Sutpen's design aims to elevate the rebuffed poor boy to the position of patriarchal authority from which he himself can vindicate his earlier position by demanding that he be recognized as an indisputably authoritative signifying power. If Sutpen plays his "trump card," if he tells Henry to prevent the marriage of Bon to Judith, he will be rebuffing Bon, refusing to recognize his right to signify, in a repetition of the rebuff which he himself received from Pettibone's authority. From the reader's perspective, this could be judged as a perpetuation of the misconception that authority can be fully autonomous. On the other hand, if he "lets matters take the course which I know they will take," his declining to act against Bon will be an implicit recognition of that difference in Bon which previously he had repudiated. Such a recognition of difference would amount to the acknowledgement that his own authority is not autonomous and to Sutpen, such an acknowledgement would be a compromise defeating the ideality of his original design. What remains an enigma is the precise nature of the "difference" which caused Sutpen to repudiate Bon and his mother initially.

Narration and Interpretation: "Inmixing" with the Other

Let us return again to the question of the discourse: if, as I suggested earlier, narrating is seen to be reading as action, and if reading is the effort to dominate or control the mysterious Other, Quentin initially resents

the interference of Shreve who threatens to usurp, by alternative interpretation, the "power-hold" which Quentin is attempting to establish over the Sutpen myth through his own interpretive activity:

> "So he got his choice made, after all," Shreve said. "He played that trump after all. And so he came home and found —"
> "Wait," Quentin said.
> "— what he must have wanted to find or anyway what he was going to find —"
> "Wait, I tell you!" Quentin said, though still he did not move nor even raise his voice — that voice with its tense suffused restrained quality: "I am telling." (AA p. 277).

Yet as their quest for the truth progresses, Quentin comes to recognize the value of Shreve's contribution as one who can read from an "Other" or alternative interpretive position. Just as Quentin, after his journey to Sutpen's Hundred with Miss Rosa acquired "knowledge of the Other" that could inform his father's narrative, so Shreve as Northerner occupies an alternative subjective position which can inform Quentin's interpretation. Gradually then, the positions of Quentin and Shreve become less the separate identities of binary oppositions — the Southerner and the Northerner, or the narrator and the narratee so strictly defined as "opposites" in Miss Rosa's narrative — than an "inmixing" of subjective positions. This shift in their relationship can be illustrated by their reconstruction of Sutpen's last-ditch attempt to produce a son and heir with Milly Jones, the fifteen year old granddaughter of Wash Jones.

While Quentin assumes the role of narrator, Shreve from the position of narratee points to the gaps in Quentin's discourse that suspend the revelation of "the truth." Quentin knows, for example, why Sutpen rejects Milly Jones just as he knows that Jones kills Sutpen with a scythe because Sutpen refuses to recognize Milly and her child as his responsibility. Yet it is only after Shreve has repeatedly interjected, in an attempt to clarify this reason for Sutpen's rejection, that Quentin reveals the detail necessary to complete the pattern of meaning and reveal "the truth":

> *"Will you wait?"* Shreve said. "— that with the son he went to all that trouble to get lying right there behind him in the cabin, he would have to taunt the grandfather into killing first him and then the child too?"
> "— What?" Quentin said. "It wasn't a son. It was a girl." (AA p. 292).

Yet, even as they account for Sutpen's death — a death which is, ironically, the direct result of Sutpen's refusal to recognize the "Otherness" of his female child as anything but the "opposite" of the male heir he wanted — Quentin and Shreve have still to unveil the mystery of the "one fact" which not only prevented Charles Bon and his mother from being accepted as part of Sutpen's design, but which seemed ultimately the cause of the design's failure.

The "One Fact": The Reason for Charles Bon's Repudiation

As the reader works towards the scene in which the

reason for Charles Bon's repudiation is presented it seems crucially important that he pay attention to the authoritative perspective from which the scene is presented. The scene itself takes place between Henry and his father in the tent of the commanding officer of Henry's regiment, during the closing stages of the Civil War. While General Compson knew of this meeting between father and son, he apparently never discovered the precise nature of their conversation: "He just learned one morning that Sutpen had ridden up to Grandfather's old regiment's headquarters and asked and received permission to speak to Henry and did speak to him and then rode away again before midnight" (AA p. 276). It must therefore be accepted that the scene described is not founded on inherited information. Moreover the changes in discursive style which it manifests suggest that it is not simply to be accepted as part of Quentin and Shreve's discourse. For where the latter is characterized by overt signs of conjecture, by the tagging of dialogue, by interjections from the listener and by the use of the epic preterite to indicate the status of the discourse as narrated and interpreted information, the characteristics of the discourse presenting Henry's meeting with his father are markedly different. For example, the use of italic print foregrounds the temporal location of the scene as a "flashback"; the epic present tense replaces the epic preterite; the absence of quotation marks suggests the erasure of spatio-temporal distance between the articulation of the dialogue and the report

of its articulation. Most significantly, Quentin and Shreve themselves are described by an overt narrative voice as having become "transmogrified into the spirits' travail of the two young men during that time fifty years ago" (AA p. 345). In this identification of both narrative participants with the protagonists of the text, the distinction not only between narrator and narratee, but between events and their interpretation becomes lost in the collaborative production of meaning. This strategy seems to illustrate precisely the activity of reading described by Felman when she argues that each narrator must first be a reader who interprets the story, "undergoing it, as a lived experience, an 'impression,' a reading effect."[29] Not only do Quentin and Shreve "undergo" or re-enact the Sutpen conflict, but the reader too, is by implication assimilated into this re-enactment. If the reader is to make sense of the Sutpen story, he too is to find himself participating in the "clash of meanings," the ambiguity which has generated the conflict of interpretations surrounding the Sutpen story.

Because the "revelation" scene is both lengthy and raises numerous significant issues, I have selected three passages for close attention. The first of these describes the reunion between the father, Thomas Sutpen, and his alienated son Henry. The second passage covers the reiteration of Charles Bon's claim to paternal recognition and

[29] Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," p. 124.

the revelation of the "one fact" which causes Thomas Sutpen to deny that recognition. The third passage describes the reaction of the two sons, Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen, to their father's authoritative standpoint.

The first passage is as follows:

> *The sentry gestures him [Henry] into the tent. He stoops through the entrance, the canvas falls behind him as someone, the only occupant of the tent, rises from a camp chair behind the table on which the candle sits, his shadow swooping high and huge up the canvas wall. He (Henry) comes to salute facing a gray sleeve with colonel's braid on it, one bearded cheek, a jutting nose, a shaggy droop of iron-riddle hair — a face which Henry does not recognise, not because he has not seen it in four years and does not expect to see it here and now, but rather because he is not looking at it. He just salutes the braided cuff and stands so until the other says,*
>
> *— Henry.*
>
> *Even now Henry does not start. He just stands so, the two of them stand so, looking at one another. It is the older man who moves first, though they meet in the center of the tent, where they embrace and kiss before Henry is aware that he has moved, was going to move, moved by what of close blood which in the reflex instant abrogates and reconciles even though it does not yet (perhaps never will) forgive, who stands now while his father holds his face between both hands, looking at it* (AA pp. 352-353).

This confrontation between father and son opens on a juxtaposition of the roles of paternity and filiality in the patriarchal Symbolic Order. The authority of the father is foregrounded by his position as occupant of the tent which, being the tent of the commanding officer Colonel Willow, is defined as the locus of authority. The shadow of the father "swooping high and huge up the canvas wall," the colonel's braid on the sleeve, the ageing gray of the "iron-riddle" hair, could all be read as signs signifying the patriarchal eminence and power. The son on the other

hand is he who is summoned, who must stoop to approach the locus of authority, and must salute that authority before him. Since he may not meet the eye of his superior, he is not in a position to recognize the father until he himself has been recognized.

The father, calling the son by name, "Henry", expresses recognition of the son's right to respond and the latter's movement and participation in the mutual embrace earns him paternal recognition and forgiveness for his earlier defection in the words " — Henry ... — My son." This scene evokes the biblical scenes in which David as King of the Jews and founder of the dynastic House of David, recognizes and forgives his recalcitrant son Absalom.[30] The title of the text Absalom, Absalom! evoking directly the story of David and Absalom, seems implicitly to acknowledge that Quentin and Shreve's interpretation of the Sutpen story as a quest after paternal recognition is the interpretation with the most narrative force.

Sutpen's recognition of Henry as his son, and by implication, his legitimate heir, is the preface to their debate of Bon's claim to paternal recognition. This debate takes place as follows:

> *" — You are going to let him marry Judith, Henry.*
> *Still Henry does not answer. It has all been said before, and now he has had four years of bitter struggle following which, whether it be victory or defeat which he has gained, at least he has gained it and has peace now, even if the*

[30] The Holy Bible (London: Cambridge University Press, King James Version) see 2 Samuel 14, xxxiii and 2 Samuel 18, xxxiii.

> *peace be mostly despair.*
> *— He cannot marry her, Henry.*
> *Now Henry speaks.*
> *— You said that before. I told you then. And now, and now it wont be much longer now and then we wont have anything left: honor nor pride nor God since God quit us four years ago only He never thought it necessary to tell us; no shoes nor clothes and no need for them; not only no land to make food out of but no need for the food and when you dont have God and honor and pride, nothing matters except that there is the old mindless meat that dont even care if it was defeat or victory, that wont even die, that will be out in the woods and fields, grubbing up roots and weeds. — Yes. I have decided, Brother or not, I have decided. I will I will.*
> *— He must not marry her, Henry.*
> *— Yes. I said Yes at first, but I was not decided then. I didn't let him. But now I have had four years to decide in. I will. I am going to.*
> *— He must not marry her, Henry. His mother's father told me that her mother had been a Spanish woman. I believed him; it was not until after he was born that I found out that his mother was part negro"* (AA pp. 354-355).

This dialogue is introduced by the reiteration of the paternal challenge of four years earlier: Sutpen enjoins Henry as his emissary to protect his sister Judith from an unlawful suitor, her half-brother. Henry's response challenges his father to recognize that the Symbolic Order of the ante-bellum South which might have been threatened by the incest implied in Bon and Judith's marriage, no longer exists to be defended. Concepts such as the patriarchal deity, the familial dynasty with the white land-owning patriarch at its head, the laws of succession, concepts on which the Symbolic Order of the South had been founded, have been discredited by the Civil War and its major achievement, the emancipation of the slaves on which the cotton dynasties had depended. [31] As Henry implies, incest, which

[31] The effects of the Civil War on the Southern economy

could be said to threaten the Symbolic Order with an excess of "sameness", can surely be overlooked when neither the Symbolic Order nor the genealogical line, nor the authority of the patriarch which it supposedly threatens retain any value.

However, when Sutpen reveals to Henry that Bon, by virtue of his negro blood represents an element of that very Otherness which subverted the Symbolic Order, he effectively forces onto him a choice between the old and the new dispensation. Is Henry to support the view of authority which his father embodies – the ideal of the Southern patriarch who has the autonomous authority to oppress his other – or is he to deny the authority of the patriarch and support instead the concept of authority as democratic by acknowledging the Other as the source of difference whereby authority is defined?

The third passage presents the response of the two sons to the paternal revelation and decree:

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presented in Faulkner's mythical reconstructions are not necessarily supportable by accounts of real events. It has for example, been argued by social historians and economists that slave-labour was an economic failure. George P. Rawick argues:

"Slavery was maintained in the South even though in the long run it was not the most economically profitable method of utilizing Southern resources. There is no doubt, after the work of Eugene Genovese and others, that while individual planters certainly did make profits from slavery, American slavery was ultimately very inefficient and Southern planters were constantly in debt to Yankees and English merchants.[25]" – George P. Rawick, The American Slave: a Composite Autobiography (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Co, 1972) p. 137. Rawick's footnote 25 refers to Eugene Genovese, The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South (New York: Pantheon, 1966) pp. 275-287.

> *There will be a little time yet for them to sit side by side upon the log in the making light of dawn, the one in the cloak, the other in the blanket; their voices are not much louder than the silent dawn itself:*
> *— So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear.*
> *Henry doesn't answer.*
> *— And he sent me no word? He did not ask you to send me to him? No word to me, no word at all? That was all he had to do, now, today; four years ago or at any time during the four years. That was all. He would not have needed to ask it, require it, of me. I would have offered it. I would have said, I will never see her again before he could have asked it of me. He did not have to do this, Henry. He didn't need to tell you I am a nigger to stop me. He could have stopped me without that, Henry.*
> *— No! Henry cries. — No! No! I will — I'll —*
> *... Now it is Bon who watches Henry; he can see the whites of Henry's eyes again as he sits looking at Henry with that expression which might be called smiling. His hand vanishes beneath the blanket and reappears, holding his pistol by the barrel, the butt extended toward Henry.*
> *— Then do it now, he says.*
> *Henry looks at the pistol; now he is not only panting, he is trembling; when he speaks now his voice is not even the exhalation, it is the suffused and suffocating inbreath itself:*
> *— You are my brother.*
> *— No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry* (AA pp. 357-358).

Sutpen has not only refused to recognize Bon as his son, but in refusing to address Bon directly, he denies him any right to a place or identity as a signifying subject in the Symbolic Order. As commented earlier, this refusal replicates the very rebuff which Sutpen himself had experienced as a boy at the Pettibone mansion. When Bon offers Henry the pistol, he effectively invites the latter to exercise the signifying power which has been recognized as his and thereby reinforce his father's act of conscious repression. However, while Henry is prepared to recognize Bon as his brother, he cannot accept that his brother is part-negro. Ironically, while he can reconcile himself

to the prospect of incest between his half brother and his sister, although this taboo is supported by natural law, he cannot reconcile himself to the prospect of miscegeny even though the latter is a taboo determined only by Symbolic Law. The irony of his choice is foregrounded by the statement and rejoinder with which the passage selected concludes:

> *— You are my brother.*
> *— No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry.*

As these lines suggest, Charles Bon is an embodiment of the recurrent "undecidability" — the contradiction "brother/nigger" — the unpredictable excess of meaning which threatens to contradict the cohesion of Sutpen's design or "text" by manifesting itself as an alternative meaning or plurality which Sutpen as the supposedly autonomous author of the design believed he could repress. Although on his first confrontation with this undecidability in Haiti, Sutpen believed he could consciously repress such subversive difference and begin his design anew thereby achieving eventually a perfect coincidence between his intention and his product, he discovers that this difference once again manifests itself, threatening to seduce the progeny or meaning which he has produced. He therefore enjoins that progeny or meaning which he recognizes as legitimate — his son Henry — to contradict or suppress the meaning which he regards as illegitimate — the person of Charles Bon — thereby preserving the cohesion of his text. However this

activity which constitutes the eradication of difference must destroy meaning per se in Sutpen's design for without the notion of the "illegitimate" Other, the "legitimate" self cannot be defined. With the murder of Bon, the Sutpen dynasty is destroyed, for Henry, the legitimate heir, by attempting to eradicate the Other thereby places himself outside the Symbolic Order as an Outlaw. The problem of the "undecidable" is meanwhile perpetuated in the over-determined signifieds which the social misfits and outcasts such as Charles Etienne Bon and Miss Rosa Coldfield typify.

Miscegeny as "Fact" or Conjecture: Clytie as Textual Sign

Many critics accept without question firstly, that the revelation of Charles Bon's identity as "Sutpen/negro" is the "final truth" produced by Quentin and Shreve's narrative interpretation, and secondly, that this interpretation is founded on the knowledge which Quentin acquires on his journey to Sutpen's Hundred with Miss Rosa. Since other critics are at pains to demonstrate that there is no evidence in the text to justify this acceptance, it is worth giving close consideration to the authority on which this "truth" is based.[32]

[32] Examples of critics who accept Quentin and Shreve's version as narrative truth can be listed as follows: Irwin, p. 93ff; Levins, p. 44; Ilse Dusoir Lind, "The Design and Meaning of Absalom, Absalom!" PMLA, (December 1955), pp. 887-912, rpt. William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, ed. F.J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960), pp. 278-304, in particular p. 296. Cleanth Brooks in his William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country does question the authority of Quentin and Shreve's narrative, but eventually resorts to the

If the "knowledge" which enables Quentin to assume narrative authority over his father is acquired at Sutpen's Hundred the night of his excursion there with Miss Rosa, the reader is forced to wait to the closing pages of the text before he is presented with the following account of Quentin's experience:

> ... waking or sleeping he walked down that upper hall between the scaling walls and beneath the cracked ceiling, toward the faint light which fell outward from the last door and paused there, saying 'No. No' and then 'Only I must. I have to' and went in, entered the bare, stale room whose shutters were closed too, where a second lamp burned dimly on a crude table; waking or sleeping it was the same: the bed, the yellow sheets and pillow, the wasted yellow face with closed, almost transparent eyelids on the pillow, the wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse; waking or sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived:
>
> *And you are —?*
> *Henry Sutpen.*
> *And you have been here —?*
> *Four years.*
> *And you came home —?*
> *To die. Yes.*
> *To die?*
> *Yes. To die.*
> *And you have been here —?*
> *Four years.*
> *And you are —?*
> *Henry Sutpen.* (AA pp. 372-373).

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suggestion that this authority depends on the assumption that not all the material of the conversation between Henry and Quentin need have been included in the text before the reader. Peter Brooks seems justified in judging this the work of "an active interpreter overanxious to fill the gaps and arrest the indeterminacies of the text — to the point of rewriting it" — P. Brooks, p. 259.

Examples of critics who emphasize the conjectural nature of Quentin and Shreve's interpretation are: P. Brooks, pp. 262-268; S. Resneck Parr, pp. 154-164.

This meeting between Quentin and Henry which might seem to promise a return to origins – a direct revelation of "truth" from one of the surviving protagonists of the Sutpen history – instead meets any expectations of a revelation with a textual vacuum. As Peter Brooks observes, the circular palindromic pattern of the dialogue in this passage constitutes "a kind of hollow structure, concave mirror or black hole at the center of the narrative,"[33] or to echo once again Geoffrey Hartman's joke, "a whodonut, a story with a hole in it." Faced with this "hole", the reader is left to search the text for the clue which suggested to Quentin the issue of miscegeny as the determining factor behind the collapse of the Sutpen dynasty.

From Shreve's interjections comes the suggestion that Clytie is the source of Quentin's knowledge:

> "Your old man," Shreve said. "When your grandfather was telling this to him, he didn't know any more what your grandfather was talking about than your grandfather knew what the demon was talking about when the demon told it to him, did he? And when your old man told it to you, you wouldn't have known what anybody was talking about if you hadn't been out there and seen Clytie. Is that right?" (AA p. 274).

The crucial point in this argument is that Quentin has "been out there and seen Clytie."[34] The verb "seen" suggests ambiguously either that Quentin had had a conversation with Clytie which revealed his privileged information,

[33] P. Brooks, p. 264.

[34] The argument which follows is a development of Peter Brooks's idea that "Clytie is used, as hermeneutic clue, throughout the novel." See Brooks, pp. 258-259.

or that his visual perception of Clytie constituted a revelation. When Shreve subsequently summarizes Quentin's experience, he confirms that Quentin's knowledge was based on observation and intuition rather than on any verbal communication:

> "... you saw that Clytie's trouble wasn't anger nor even distrust; it was terror, fear. And she didn't tell you in so many words because she was still keeping that secret for the sake of the man who had been her father too as well as for the sake of the family which no longer existed, whose here-to-fore inviolate and rotten mausoleum she still guarded — didn't tell you in so many words anymore than she told you in so many words how she had been in the room that day when they brought Bon's body in and Judith took from his pocket the metal case she had given him with her picture in it; she didn't tell you, it just came out of the terror and the fear ... not nigger terror because it was not about herself but was about whatever it was that was upstairs, that she had kept hidden up there for almost four years; and she didn't tell you in the actual words because even in the terror she kept the secret; nevertheless she told you, or at least all of a sudden you knew —"
>
> (AA pp. 350-351, my emphasis).

Shreve's fourfold repetition of the statement "she didn't tell you" foregrounds the inaccuracy and immediate correction in the last line: Clytie did not tell Quentin anything. As "... the worn coffee-colored face staring at him, the match held in one coffee-colored and doll-like hand above her head" (AA p. 368) she seems instead to stand as a sign which stimulates in Quentin a process of recognition. The repetition of the word "coffee-colored" seems to foreground her signifying value as the excess of meaning which Quentin interprets as the source of frustration to the Sutpen design.

In retrospect it is possible for the reader to trace the "coffee-colored face" of Clytie as a sign of the repeated irruption of "Otherness" into the Sutpen design. The first manifestation of this sign can be identified in the concluding point of Chapter One narrated by Miss Rosa. Sutpen's ritual affirmation of his right of authority over his negro slaves in the stable fight closes on the image of "the two Sutpen faces":

> But I was not there. I was not there to see the two Sutpen faces this time — once on Judith and once on the negro girl beside her — looking down through the square entrance to the loft (AA p. 30).

The suggestion here is that Judith as white Sutpen girl is accompanied by her dark Sutpen double, a configuration implying the possibility of an equivalent dark counterpart to Henry as white Sutpen boy. While the two girls watch their father's struggle for ascendency over his dark counterpart with equanimity, the same struggle distresses their white brother to the point of making him vomit. This could be interpreted as a prognostication of the conflict which Henry will have to face as the inheritor of a patriarchal role that refuses to recognize the status of the dark Other as anything more than the "opposite," the other.

Clytie's face as a sign can be identified again in two passages from the second segment of Miss Rosa's narrative. On the occasion of Charles Bon's death, Miss Rosa, having been summoned and driven to Sutpen's Hundred by Wash Jones, enters the mansion half expecting to meet Henry,

returned from the War. However,

> *"... it was not Henry's face. It was Sutpen face enough, but not his; Sutpen coffee-colored face enough there in the dim light, barring the stairs: and I running out of the bright afternoon, into the silence of that brooding house where I could see nothing at first: then gradually the face, the Sutpen face not approaching, not swimming up out of the gloom, but already there, rocklike and firm and antedating time and house and doom and all, waiting there (oh yes, he chose well; he bettered choosing, who created in his own image the old Cerberus of his private hell) — the face without sex or age because it had never possessed either: the same sphinx face which she had been born with, which had looked down from the loft that night beside Judith's and which she still wears now at seventy-four, looking at me with no change, no alteration in it at all, as though it had known to the second when I was to enter ..."* (AA p. 136).

As an undecidable element in Sutpen's text that is both the product of his authorship yet not acknowledged as a significant meaning, a Sutpen yet a slave, Clytie also stands as the play of difference that cannot be excluded from any discourse, and that ultimately denies the possibility of a fully cohesive text. While she is a vital element in an interpretation which recognizes the play of difference such as the reading of Quentin and Shreve, she may also be the obstacle preventing the final closure of interpretation on "full truth". This obstructive effect of Clytie as textual "undecidable" is dramatized at the level of the story by her action of preventing Miss Rosa access to the "truth" behind the closed door of the bedroom that contains Judith and the body of Charles Bon. It is evident again in her protection of Charles Etienne Bon and Jim Bond from the interrogation of intruders (for example, AA pp. 200-201; 214-216), and Henry, returned from

exile, from exposure to the judgement of the law.

In the following passage, Miss Rosa expands on her description of Clytie:

> *"Clytie, not inept, anything but inept: perverse inscrutable and paradox: free, yet incapable of freedom who had never once called herself a slave, holding fidelity to none like the indolent and solitary wolf or bear ... — Clytie who in the very pigmentation of her flesh represented that debacle which had brought Judith and me to what we were and which had made of her (Clytie) that which she declined to be just as she had declined to be that from which its purpose had been to emancipate her, as though presiding aloof upon the new, she deliberately remained to represent to us the threatful portent of the old"*
> (AA pp. 156-157).

Once again allusions to Clytie's paradoxical undecidability are apparent. Even more significant however, is Miss Rosa's identification of Clytie's negroid blood as the sign of the social debacle of the Civil War, an identification which suggests unwittingly the connection between the collapse of the plantation society which, in this mythical account, is represented as dependent on slavery, and the collapse of Sutpen's patriarchal authority which had depended on the oppression of the slave as other. As a product of a waiving of boundaries between black and white, Clytie does indeed seem to anticipate or "preside aloof upon" the new Symbolic Order's recognition of Otherness, while simultaneously representing the excess of meaning produced by the inflexibility of the old Order's refusal to recognize the marriage or equal value of black and white.

The final description of Clytie occurs in Quentin's visualisation of the inferno at the Sutpen mansion:

> He, Quentin, could see it, could see the deputy holding her [Miss Rosa] while the driver backed the ambulance to safety and returned, the three faces all a little wild now since they must have believed her — the three of them staring, glaring at the doomed house: and then for a moment maybe Clytie appeared in that window from which she must have been watching the gates constantly day and night for three months — the tragic gnome's face beneath the clean headrag, against a red background of fire, seen for a moment between two swirls of smoke, looking down at them, perhaps not even now with triumph and no more of despair than it had ever worn, possibly even serene above the melting clapboards before the smoke swirled across it again — and he, Jim Bond, the scion, the last of his race, seeing it too now and howling with human reason now since now even he could have known what he was howling about (AA pp. 375-376).

Presented through the mediation of an overt narrative voice, the status of this description as conjecture is indicated by modifiers such as "maybe," "perhaps," and "possibly," and the modal auxiliaries in the verbs "must have been watching" and "could have known." Thus even in this final interpretation, Clytie's face as a sign is given no final, closed interpretation. It is interpreted as signifying neither triumph nor despair, but "possibly" serenity. There is no suggestion that Clytie regards herself as either the victim of, nor the plaintiff against, the "injustices" of the antebellum South. Like Charles Etienne Bon she seems to stand simply as the stoical scapegoat who bears the failures of the Symbolic Order within which she is a misfit.

In terms of Miss Rosa's mythical interpretation of the Sutpen story, the image of the inferno which consumes the last of the devil's progeny and the remnants of his handi-

work while the "old Cerberus" remains on guard at the window or "gate" of this hell, seems to provide the final closure of narrative meaning. This closure of the text which had defined Miss Rosa as a signifying subject, and the elimination of the Otherness which had defined her as its victim, are accompanied by Miss Rosa's loss of consciousness and eventual death. One undecidable for which her demon-myth does not account, and which survives to subvert the closure of her text is the figure of Jim Bond – the "One nigger Sutpen left" (AA p. 378).

From the reader's perspective, what is particularly interesting about Clytie as "hermeneutic clue" is that it is only possible to identify her "coffee-colored face" as a sign of the repeated irruption of Otherness into the Sutpen "text" in retrospect. It is only once a "primal scene" has been posited – Sutpen's refusal to accept Bon as "Sutpen" on the grounds of his identity as "part-negro" – that meaning can be attributed to Otherness – the Sutpen-negro-female – as that which has been repressed. If the tragedy of Thomas Sutpen lies in his failure to recognize the role of the Other as that without which his authority can have no definition, the reader, looking back along the path of his quest for "the truth", is liable to find that he too has failed to recognize the power of the Other as the locus of the mystery, because of its apparent marginality or insignificance. In other words, the reader, like Miss Rosa Coldfield and Mr Compson, has been as much a dupe of the unrecognized Other as Thomas Sutpen was.

Furthermore, even if at the conclusion of the story the reader accepts Quentin and Shreve's reconstruction of the "primal scene" in the Confederate Army tent, no privileged narrative perspective exists to authorize this scene as "real". Instead, any hope of verifying this "return to origins" is consumed in the flames of the final inferno at Sutpen's Hundred.

IN CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this chapter, I proposed to focus on the nature and accessibility of textual "truth"; the supplementarity of the narrative and interpretive activities, and the problems arising from the ordering of difference according to a system of hierarchical, binary oppositions. What conclusions can now be drawn about these issues?

If the opinion is sustained that the narrative of Quentin and Shreve is as much based on conjecture as the other versions of the Sutpen tragedy, it nevertheless seems admissible that this particular version of the story is — in the words of the overt narrator — "probably true enough" (AA p. 335). In this phrase there seems a twofold implication: firstly, that it is possible in narrative to arrive at some kind of "truth", but secondly that the status of that truth retains an element of undecidability which renders it irreducibly open to revision. In other words, if the Other as the unknowable remains irreducibly beyond

the reach of conscious knowledge, "the truth" must be defined as that solution which by consensus is seen to account for the most aspects of a particular mystery. What then, does this perspective on "truth" imply about the narrative and interpretive activities which produce it?

Firstly, it is clear that if "truth" calls for "consensus" then the notion of "autonomous authority" as a source of truth is challenged. As I hope the preceding discussion has shown, "authority" is an issue with which Absalom, Absalom! is concerned at the level of both the story and of its narration. Let us consider then the conclusions that can be drawn at the level of narration: the discourse of Absalom, Absalom! can be said to map a developing perspective of interpretive narrative activity, beginning with the concept of an "autonomous" authoritative narrating figure — Miss Rosa Coldfield — who attempts to produce an irrefutable interpretation of events through a "closed" discourse of which "myth" is the textual product. The very closure which such a discourse attempts to secure renders it particularly vulnerable to subversion by the Other, for the range of ambiguity or Otherness which it attempts to exclude, being correspondingly wide, is all the more difficult to control. It is not surprising, therefore, that even the most fundamental claims of such a narrative (for example, the claim that Sutpen is a demon) are subverted by alternative accounts — the description, for example, of the rebuffed "white trash" boy at the Pettibone mansion.

The second pattern of narrative interpretation presented is that of the logical rationalist who establishes "the truth" — or ironically, sometimes fails to establish it — by careful investigation of all available evidence and thereafter the deduction of a conclusion. This method is recognizable as that adopted by the figure of the detective investigator already discussed in Chapter One. If in conventional detective fiction the position adopted is that "there are no mysteries, only incorrect reasoning,"[35] Absalom, Absalom! challenges this view, presenting Mr Compson, a legal man, confounded by the failure of the rational.

The third perspective of narrative interpretation presented by the text is one in which the positions of narrator and narratee, or writer and reader, although distinguishable as different, are inseparable, interacting with and informing each other while differing from or pulling against each other. This model of narrative interpretation evokes the model of subjectivity postulated by Lacan in which the subject of the signifier or utterance and the subject of the signified or statement are described not as two distinct "gravitational centres" but as two "gravitational counter-forces" (see my Introduction, p. 27). It would seem that, where Freudian psychoanalytic theory as interpreted by Lacan replaces the concept of the autonomous Cartesian cogito who has the potential to produce "truth-full" discourse with the split-subject and the split

[35] Holquist, "Whodunit and Other Questions," p. 141.

discourse, literature, as embodied in Absalom, Absalom!, relinquishes the concepts of the autonomous narrator and the "true" story and explores the possibility of narrative interpretation as dialectical interaction, producing "truth" as that which is "most probable."

Just as the shortcomings of "autonomous", "independent" authority are exposed at the level of the discourse, so at the level of the story, the tragedy of Thomas Sutpen can be read as the failure of an individual and a Symbolic system to recognize or accommodate the possibility of that which is unnameable in the terms of that system. The particular subtlety of Absalom, Absalom! lies in its implicit inclusion of the reader within its narrative framework so that he, like the other narrative interpreters of the Sutpen story, finds himself caught by the very "blindspot" of the unrecognized Other which caused the failure of Thomas Sutpen's design. And even if the reader, at the close of the tale believes that eventually, he has recognized the Other and therefore "knows the truth", he is reminded of the excess signification which lurks beyond his interpretive consciousness:

> "You've got one nigger left. One nigger Sutpen left. Of course you can't catch him and you don't even always see him and you never will be able to use him. But you've got him there still. You still hear him at night sometimes. Don't you?" (AA p. 378).

**** ****

CHAPTER THREE

THE NYMPHET AS THE FORBIDDEN OTHER: QUESTING AFTER THE SATISFACTION OF DESIRE IN NABOKOV'S LOLITA

> Desire is that which is manifested in the interval that demand hollows within itself, in as much as the subject, in articulating the signifying chain, brings to light the want-to-be, together with the appeal to receive the complement from the Other, if the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this want, or lack.
>
> — Jacques Lacan

In the Introduction to this thesis, I pointed out that one of Lacan's undertakings in his "return to Freud" was to translate Freudian sexual mythology into linguistic terms. One implication which this translation brings to light is the relationship between linguistic law and social law, of which morality, or the codes governing sexual behaviour, is one aspect. To recapitulate briefly, in Lacan's terms, language is a principal part of the Symbolic Order of exchange which holds society together by allocating roles to individuals within the system. In other words, because linguistic nomination determines the place, and therefore, the exchange value of the individual, because linguistic order determines social order, a threat to the former must also constitute a threat to the latter. In Julia Kristeva's words, "There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official laws."[1]

Now, one of the ways in which the order of the linguistic system can be subverted is by the kind of verbal play that is identifiable as the joke, the pun, the witty retort and so on. Lacan argues that in Freud's work Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,

> ... the effect of the unconscious is demonstrated to us in its most subtle confines. And the face which it reveals to us is that of the spirit in the ambiguity conferred on it by Language, where the other side of its regalian power is the "pointe" [Footnote: "Witty phrase" or "conceit"] by which the whole of its order is annihilated in an instant – the pointe, in fact, where

[1] Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," in Desire in Language (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980) p. 65.

> its creative activity unveils its absolute gratuitousness, where its domination over the Real is expressed in the challenge of non-sense, where humour, in the malicious grace of the esprit libre, symbolizes a Truth that has not said its last word.[2]

In other words, the joke can be seen as an irruption of Otherness or "non-sense" into the order and sense of conscious discourse – an irruption which threatens to subvert the Symbolic Order which can only be sustained by the repression of such Otherness. Just as the preservation of linguistic meaning depends on prohibitions which outlaw the disruptive "play" of the Other in discourse, so the preservation of social harmony depends on prohibitions which

> ... maintain a sort of sanctuary at the heart of the community, an area where that minimum of nonviolence essential to the survival of the children and the community's cultural heritage – essential, in short, to everything that sustains man's humanity – is jealously preserved.[3]

Now, in this chapter, I wish to argue that it is precisely this identity between linguistic transgression and social, or more specifically, sexual transgression, which Vladimir Nabokov challenges his reader to recognize in his novel Lolita. This novel confronts its reader with a paradox arising from the apparent disparity between the playfulness or artifice of its discourse, and the undeniable

[2] Jacques Lacan, Speech and Language, p. 33.

[3] René Girard, Violence and the Sacred, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977) p. 221.

seriousness of the moral issues it raises. As the confession of a forty-two year old sexual pervert who is to be tried for the crimes of child-seduction and murder, Lolita is a shocking novel. Yet as the "masterpiece" of an articulate, well-read and witty literary scholar who not only is aware of the representational nature of language, but delights in linguistic games, it is also a fascinating network of parody, literary allusion and word-play. Without on the one hand diminishing the novel's shocking impact, or on the other hand condemning the subtlety of its linguistic play, I shall try, then, in this chapter to investigate the implications of Lolita as a quest to attain the forbidden perfection, to raise the veil from the sacred mystery, to satisfy Desire.

The Foreword

Let me begin by commenting briefly on the Foreword to Lolita since this is one of the first "jokes" which the reader is likely to encounter in his reading of the novel. I refer to it as a "joke" because John Ray Jnr PhD who writes it is no "real" editor, but is as much a fictional creation as Humbert Humbert the "confessant" who writes the main text of Lolita. This is indicated by John Ray's claim that he is a "good friend and relation" of Clarence Choate Clark who is named both in the Foreword and in the main text as Humbert Humbert's lawyer. In other words, John Ray, Clarence Clark and Humbert Humbert are

of the same fictional status, and the Foreword is an extension of the main fictional text. Implicit in this "trick" is the ironic possibility that any Foreword to a narrative text must be a part of, a participation in, the narrative conflict it seeks to comment on, for – as I hope was illustrated in Chapter Two – any interpretation of a narrative constitutes a "return" to the conflict which the narrative itself articulates, and therefore a continuation of the effect of that conflict.

Now, one might argue that the point of a Foreword is to provoke the reader's interest, and to offer him some guidelines for the reading he is about to undertake, from the perspective of one who already has a knowledge of the text's contents. Ambiguously, it precedes the text, but its commentary is retrospective. An effective Foreword must then, stimulate and inform its reader without revealing the "truth" of the text prematurely. According to these criteria, John Ray's Foreword is effective, but ironically, this is through no editorial skill of his own. Oblivious to the possibility that he may forestall the reader's quest, he on the one hand, garrulously divulges the conclusions of the novel's plot. To the reader, however, these premature revelations will have little meaning until the novel has been read; thus the "mystery" of the novel remains intact. On the other hand, John Ray is too prudishly inhibited to do more than allude to "scenes that a certain type of mind might call aphrodisiac," – allusions which are guaranteed to provoke the reader's interest and

spur him on to discover "the truth" of Lolita.

WHO OR WHAT IS LOLITA?

> Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul.[4]

This opening line with its carefully matched syntax, its poetic use of metaphor, alliteration and assonance, says as much about its author, Humbert Humbert, as it does about its subject-matter, "Lolita." While the latter is presented as a powerful and ambivalent effect upon the author – both inspiring and illuminating him as well as causing him to be inflamed or consumed with passion – the latter himself is revealed as a shrewd and skilful rhetorician.

The playful exploration of the name "Lolita" which follows these opening statements suggests that, far from being an arbitrary and exchangeable signifier like "Lo," "Lola," "Dolly" or "Dolores," the name "Lolita" is a repository of private meanings – meanings which will be revealed to the reader as the text unfolds. "Lolita" then, will stand as the very particular name designated to a child by her middle-aged lover, and also as the text which attempts to justify the transgressive Desire which gave rise to the name "Lolita."

After this introductory eulogy, Humbert, as if acknowledging the growing interest of the reader, next poses

[4] Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980 rpt 1982) p. 5; hereafter cited as "L". I have been unable to use Alfred Appel's excellent annotated version of this text because of its unavailability.

the question, "Did she have a precursor?" This seems to anticipate the reader's expectation that the story must have an origin, and while the author appears to indulge this expectation with the prompt response, "She did, indeed she did," he also seems to toy with it in proffering information evasively and mysteriously: "In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a princedom by the sea." If this is the origin of the "truth" which Humbert is setting out to confess, it bears an unsettling resemblance to the formulaic introduction of the fairy tale which, in its evasion of precise chronological setting ("Once upon a time ..."), and of precise geographical location ("... in a far off land ..."), announces the fictional nature of its contents. This may seem to the reader an incongruous stylistic mode to adopt for a confession.

The next rhetorical question and answer may appear even more perturbing: "Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer." While the question suggests Humbert's anticipation of the reader's growing interest in his tale, the calculated evasion with which he meets this interest suggests his consciousness of the control he has both over his story and therefore over the reader of that story. The comment with which this paragraph concludes may reinforce the reader's misgivings: "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style." What is startling about this observation, is not so much the revelation of the author's status as

"murderer" – a revelation for which the reader may have been prepared by the editor's reference to Humbert's "trial," "legal captivity," "crime" and so forth – but the suggestion that Humbert Humbert, as confessant, is not only a brilliant rhetorician, but is aware that language, far from being transparent, is a representative medium by which "the truth" must always be in some way distorted.

In the light of this implication, the quest upon which Humbert Humbert invites the reader to embark in the concluding paragraph is strangely ambiguous. He addresses his readers as jurymen who may regard his confession as "exhibit number one." Clearly then the reader is required to embark on a "truth-seeking" activity. Furthermore, the material he is to examine might be expected to deal with experiences blissful and perhaps even divine, since they are "what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied."[5] On the other hand, "exhibit number one" is a "tangle of thorns," a metaphor suggesting a confusion of pain and suffering, in which the expectation of finding "the truth" would seem doomed from the outset.

[5] As Carl Proffer has demonstrated in his Keys to Lolita (London and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968) pp. 34-44, this reference to the seraphs can be traced to the following lines of Edgar A. Poe's poem Annabel Lee:

> "But we loved with a love that was more than love –
> I and my Annabel Lee –
> With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven
> Coveted her and me."

– Edgar Allan Poe, "Annabel Lee", The Portable Poe, ed. Philip van Doren Stern (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1957 rpt 1977) p. 633.

Further discussion of Humbert Humbert's reference to this poem will be offered shortly.

Thus the chapter concludes with the ambivalent fusion of exhaltation and frustration with which it began in the memorable opening line.

THE CONFESSANT AS SPLIT SUBJECT

Before the reader, cast overtly in the role of juryman by Humbert Humbert, begins his quest for "the truth" in Humbert's confession, it seems important for him to give some consideration to the notion of "confessant" on which this text draws.

It may on first reflection seem that inherent in the notion of the confessant, there lies the presupposition of an autonomous confessing consciousness and a full or complete truth which, having been wholly or partially concealed is finally to be acknowledged. However, also inherent in the notion of a confessant there seems to lie the implication of a split or duplication of the subject who confesses. In his position as murderer who addresses his confession to a jury, Humbert Humbert would seem to conform to the description of the retrospective, converted narrator offered by William Spengemann in his text The Forms of Autobiography. Describing the narrative mode of The Confessions of St Augustine (Books I through IX), Spengemann comments,

> ... The mode is grounded ultimately in the conviction that the retrospective narrator can see his life from a point outside it, that his view is not subject to the limiting conditions of the life he is recounting. While the past self, the protagonist, can see each event in his life only in its ever-changing relation to a past

> which is being continually reshaped by the addition of new experience in the present, and to future expectations which experience is continually revising, the narrator can see each past event in its fixed relation to a past which has presumably achieved its final form. Because the narrator does not stand within the temporal span of the action he is reporting, because he does not stand in time at all, his perspective is not altered by new experience. He contemplates each past event from the same, unmoving point, the point of immutable truth.[6]

As will be discussed in greater detail later, this distinction between the self-deluded protagonist and the self-aware narrator is terminated by a moment of conversion or enlightenment, the moment at which the roles of narrator and protagonist fuse.

Now it would seem that in the text of Lolita, the pseudonym "Humbert Humbert" supports the notion of the split or doubled subject that the action of confession produces. Humbert as author (whom for convenience I shall refer to now and subsequently as HUMBERT) is the enlightened subject who is separated from Humbert as protagonist (whom I shall refer to as Humbert) by virtue of his capacity to understand the events past. In other words it is his progress through the events which he will now describe in his confession that has brought him to this enlightened position. The alienation of confessant from protagonist is frequently foregrounded in the text by the abandonment of the first person narration in favour of third person narration. The reader's quest is to follow HUMBERT's con-

[6] William Spengemann, The Forms of Autobiography (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980) pp. 6-7.

fession to the point where he too will reach the state of enlightenment which HUMBERT appears to have acquired.

It seems relevant at this point to consider the role attributed to the "real" author Nabokov, in the discussion which follows. It seems clear that Nabokov has effectively written himself out of his own novel by casting Humbert Humbert not merely in the role of narrator, but in the role of author — an academic who has followed the education and career of a literary scholar. Occasionally HUMBERT will narrate a series of events which appear to him to conform to a meaningful pattern; yet he finds himself unable to identify the author or agent of such events. An example of such a situation can be found in the circumstances which lead to Charlotte Haze's death. Under such circumstances, HUMBERT ascribes the pattern of meaning to an imaginary agent, Aubrey McFate. Now, while it is possible for the reader standing outside the text to identify Aubrey McFate as an alias for Vladimir Nabokov or the authorial presence, it would seem that the figure of McFate points to a more important textual issue. If HUMBERT as author finds himself confronted with patterns of meaning which he did not consciously produce and which he must attribute to an agent Other than himself, so too Nabokov as author is likely to be confronted with patterns of meaning of which he is not the controlling subject. To whom is he to attribute these patterns? To his own McFate, Chance, Destiny or God? In Lacanian terms he must attribute them to the locus of the Other or the compound

of alternative subjective positions which by their repression give definition to the author's subjectivity and his discourse. Thus to be entirely accurate, it must be argued, not that McFate is Nabokov, but that Nabokov casts himself in the role of the Other which HUMBERT identifies as McFate. Nabokov as the authorial presence remains written out of his own text.

NYMPHANCY, THE ORIGINAL NYMPHET AND THE TWOFOLD WORLD

One of HUMBERT's first tasks at the start of his confession is to identify the origins of the transgressive impulses which have been his downfall. He begins with the description of his childhood in the paradise of the luxurious Hotel Mirana which his father owned on the French Riviera, and identifies his "fall from grace" with the loss of his childhood sweetheart Annabel Leigh. He declares,

> I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel (L p. 14)

and,

> ... today, in September 1952, after twenty-nine years have elapsed, I think I can distinguish in her the initial fateful elf in my life (L p. 18).

HUMBERT's allusion, with the name "Annabel Leigh," to Edgar Allan Poe's poem Annabel Lee has already been mentioned. The most obvious connection that can be made between Humbert and Poe is that both were in love with girl-children.[7]

[7] HUMBERT frequently attempts to justify his taste for nym-

Poe married the thirteen year old Virginia Clemm and wrote the poem Annabel Lee in 1849 after Virginia's death in 1847. The implication is therefore that Poe's Annabel Lee is a fiction which may represent a "real" girl-child, but HUMBERT's "Annabel Leigh" is a fiction founded on a fiction. That HUMBERT is uncertain of the "origin" of his desire for a nymphet is suggested in his description of Annabel as magical and fateful. It seems that he uses an arbitrary fictional construct in the place of "origin", just as later in his confession he is to use a name from Lolita's Ramsdale class list, "Aubrey McFate," as the nomination for the unidentifiable agent of apparently meaningful patterns of events. Just as McFate in Lacanian terms could be described as "the Other," the locus of subjective difference, so Annabel Leigh could be seen as the fictional construct embodying that "Otherness" or difference which

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phets by referring to eminent literary figures whom he claims to have shared this taste. As Carl Proffer demonstrates, he often "distorts a few of the facts and adds some details." Proffer extracts and indicates the distortions in the following passage:

> "'After all, Dante fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine, a sparkling girleen, painted and lovely, and bejewelled, in a crimson frock, and this was in 1274, in Florence, at a private feast in the merry month of May. And when Petrarch fell in love with his Laureen, she was a fairheaded [sic] nymphet of twelve running in the wind, in the pollen and dust, a flower in flight, in the beautiful plain as descried from the hills of Vaucluse' (p. 121) [L p. 19].

"Dante's first meeting with Beatrice is described in his Vita Nuova; he doesn't specify the month. Petrarch didn't fall in love with Laureen (Laura — Lolita?) when she was twelve and running through the pollen near Vaucluse. She was about eighteen, and it was in the church of St. Clara in Avignon (April 6, 1327)."

— Keys to "Lolita" pp. 26-27.

by its repression or absence determines meaning, yet which constitutes the lack which gives rise to "Desire." Humbert's desire then is the "Desire of the Other"[8] and, as shall be demonstrated shortly, this "Other" is represented for him by "nymphancy".

A brief digression is necessary at this point in order to comment on the apparent parody of many "orthodox" Freudian views in Lolita to which both Alfred Appel and Carl Proffer draw attention. Appel comments:

> Nabokov burlesques the case study by purposely providing the childhood "trauma" which supposedly accounts for Humbert's nympholepsy: the incomplete coitus which the thirteen year old Humbert experienced on the French Riviera with Annabel who died four months later ... By naming Humbert's lost love "Annabel Lee" Nabokov fuses Freud with Poe?[9]

Proffer comments:

> ... when Humbert identifies Lolita with Annabel ... we should realize the parallels are consciously contrived, that they are "psychological" only in the purely literary sense, that Annabel is a literary echo, not proof for the theories of the Viennese healers. The only place King Sigmund has in the novel (or any of Nabokov's other works) is in a cage with the bêtes noires[10]

In relation to these comments, the following irony can be pointed out: the very subject of parody — the childhood "trauma" as "origin" — which Appel and Proffer identify

[8] Jacques Lacan, "The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power," Ecrits p. 264

[9] Alfred Appel, "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody," in Nabokov: The Man and His Work, ed. L.S. Dembo (Wisconsin: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1967) pp. 121-123.

[10] Carl Proffer, Keys to "Lolita", p. 45.

here rests on one of the misinterpretations of Freud's work that Lacan's "return" to Freud sought to rectify. Commenting on the "traumatic experience" Lacan states,

> If this event was recognized as being the cause of the symptom, it was because the putting into words of the event (in the patient's "stories") determined the lifting of the symptom[11]

In other words, what was, and still is, important in the Freudian analysis is not so much the identification of the experience itself, which relieved the symptom — for as the inverted commas around "stories" indicates, there was doubt as to whether such experiences had in fact taken place — but the experience of being able to express in language that which had previously been repressed as the Other, or the unspeakable forbidden. It seems to be precisely this naming of the forbidden Other with an obviously fictional name (Annabel Leigh) that HUMBERT undertakes here.

Returning once more to the confession, the signifier "nymphancy" is chosen by HUMBERT to designate a particular state of girlhood which he introduces as follows:

> Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travellers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphets' (L p. 16).

The particularity of nymphancy seems to lie in its differ-

[11] Jacques Lacan, Speech and Language, p. 16.

ence from the norm or the predictable. It is neither an attribute belonging to all girl-children of the age nine to fourteen years, nor particularly to those who conform to the criteria conventionally determining "good" looks. Instead, nymphancy is determined by,

> ... certain mysterious characteristics, the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm that separates the nymphet from such coevals of hers as are incomparably more dependent on the spatial world of synchronous phenomena than on that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes (L p. 17).

In this description there is a noticeably high density of words and phrases which suggest the inadequacy of linguistic signification to elucidate the nature of the signified, for example, "mysterious," "elusive," "shifty," insidious charm," "intangible island of entranced time." It seems that even as HUMBERT attempts to represent the "essence" of nymphancy, that "essence" escapes him in the inadequacy of the signifiers he uses. In this sense nymphancy appears to be the sexual counterpart of the je ne sais quoi recognized in literature by, for example, the Neo-classicists and described as follows:

> The je ne sais quoi in a work of art, recognized only by the intuitions of sensibility, cannot be explained in terms of its causes, nor precisely defined, nor even named except by a phrase which is an expression of our ignorance. There is often the implication that these happy chances have a way of occurring only to poets capable of calculating well; but when they luckily occur, he knows not how, they licence him not only to transcend existing rules, but even to "offend" or break these rules, in order to achieve a sublimer

poetry than rules can comprehend [my emphasis].[12]

Another connection between nymphancy and literature is made by Lionel Trilling when he comments that it was on a demoniac quality that the Greeks based "their idea of the disease of nympholepsy and later peoples their conceptions of Undines, Belles Dames Sans Merci and White Goddesses."[13]

As has already been suggested, nymphancy translated into Lacanian terms could be regarded as that Other or locus of difference, the repression of which both allows for the definition of "meaning", but simultaneously gives rise to unconscious Desire.

Returning once more to HUMBERT's narrative, the experience of recognizing nymphancy is described as a form of revelation which permits the enlightened subject to appreciate that the nymphet is "Other" than what she may appear to be to "normal" vision. However, just as nymphancy is not the property of all "normal" girl-children, so it is not a property recognizable by all "normal" men:

> You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine ... in order to discern at once, ... the little deadly demon among the wholesome children (L p. 17).

Now according to a certain Romantic conception, the common

[12] M.H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957 rpt 1980) p. 195.

[13] Lionel Trilling, "The Last Lover," Encounter, 11 (1958) p. 12.

attribute of Artist and Madman is the inability to accept the rules for "normative" behaviour imposed upon him by society. While the Artist may articulate this refusal by demonstrating the arbitrariness of the norm and therefore achieving at worst a measure of toleration from society and at best society's acclaim for his "genius", the Madman, unable to articulate the reasons for his refusal of the norm, earns the rejection of society.

Yet what is it in the Artist and the Madman that causes the refusal of social norms? According to HUMBERT it is his "infinite melancholy," the "bubble of hot poison in his loins," the "super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow" in the "subtle spine." Once again this appears to be a sexualisation of the concept of natural poetic genius, that "special gift" or "touch of madness" described by Aristotle[14] or the "natural genius" which Abrams, referring to the work of Joseph Addison, describes as follows:

> Natural geniuses, a class comprising Homer, Pindar, the Old Testament poets, and Shakespeare, are 'the prodigies of mankind, who by the mere strength of natural parts and without any assistance of art or learning, have produced works that were the delight of their own times, and the wonder of posterity.'[15]

By translating "nymphancy" into the <u>je ne sais quoi</u>, and Humbert's sexual Desire into the artistic longing for perfection, HUMBERT strives to make his past transgression acceptable. He attempts to demonstrate that his Desire

[14] Aristotle, <u>Poetics</u>, quoted in M.H. Abrams, <u>The Mirror and the Lamp</u>, p. 188.

[15] Abrams, <u>The Mirror and the Lamp</u>, p. 187.

for the "perfect union" with a nymphet was no more perverted and despicable than the artist's Desire to achieve the perfect masterpiece."

To focus once again on nymphancy, it seems that the split which Humbert discovers in the nature of femininity — the split between nymphet and normal girl-child — manifests itself on a wider scale as a split between his own world view and that of society:

> No wonder, then, that my adult life during the European period of my existence proved monstrously twofold. Overtly, I had so-called normal relationships with a number of terrestrial women having pumpkins or pears for breasts; inside, I was consumed by a hell furnace of localized lust for every passing nymphet whom as a law-abiding poltroon I never dared approach. The human females I was allowed to wield were but palliative agents. I am ready to believe that the sensations I derived from natural fornication were much the same as those known to normal big males consorting with their normal big mates in that routine rhythm which shakes the world. The trouble was that those gentlemen had not, and I had, caught glimpses of an incomparably more poignant bliss. The dimmest of my pollutive dreams was a thousand times more dazzling than all the adultery the most virile writer of genius or the most talented impotent might imagine. My world was split. I was aware of not one but two sexes, neither of which was mine; both would be termed female by the anatomist. But to me, through the prism of my senses, 'they were as different as mist and mast' (L p. 18).

It would seem from this account that a discrepancy arises between the differences which society recognizes in the world and represents in language and the differences which Humbert recognizes in the world and represents in language. For example, society recognizes the signifieds of the terms men and women as different and their sexual relationship as natural and stimulating. From Humbert's perspective

however, the signifieds represented by the terms men and women are recognized as barely distinguishable and their sexual relationship as conventionalised and tedious. This sense of tedium is mimed in the following passage:

> I am ready to believe that the sensations I derived from natural fornication were much the same as those known to normal big males consorting with their normal big mates in that routine rhythm which shakes the world.

The two parties who participate in the sexual activity are described in almost identical phrases, "normal big males" and their "normal big mates." Only the l and the t of the words "males" and "mates" indicate that there might be any difference in the participants signified. The sexual activity itself is represented with the signifiers "routine rhythm" in which the alliterative initial consonants r suggest a repetitive conformity in the action signified. This is foregrounded by the ironic use of the qualifying cliché "which shakes the world."

If patterning and repetition of signifiers is used particularly to signify a conventionalised and repetitive activity, the implication is also apparent that to express any experience in language is to impose upon it the patterning and conventions of language. To express an experience in language is to render it linguistically repeatable and thereby destroy its uniqueness. The unique or perfect experience must necessarily remain beyond language, as Humbert suggests, in the realms of dream or phantasy.

The "split" in Humbert's world depends not only on

society's recognition of difference (men/women) where Humbert recognizes sameness or monotony (males/mates) but on society's recognition of sameness (femininity) where Humbert recognizes difference (nymphancy/terrestrial women). Thus Humbert repeats:

> My world was split. I was aware of not one but two sexes, neither of which was mine; both would be termed female by the anatomist. But to me, through the prism of my senses, 'they were as different as mist and mast.'

While earlier in his argument he played on the similarity of two signifiers males and mates to convey the recognition of corresponding similarity in signifieds represented, he now plays on the similarity of two signifiers mist and mast to convey the recognition that similar signifiers may represent vastly differing signifieds. Thus, in the course of his argument that there are two vastly different kinds of womanhood, he simultaneously demonstrates that the relation between the signifier and the signified is purely arbitrary. Similarities in signifiers may not necessarily represent similarities in signifieds (as in the case of homonyms) while differences in signifiers may not necessarily represent differences in signifieds (as in the case of synonyms). The relation between signifier and signified, between language and the ostensive world is therefore dependent on convention. It thus follows that while the signifiers mist and mast may appear barely distinguishable, the first signifier represents the concept of water vapour with its accompanying associations – intangibility and elusiveness obscured visibility or Haze-iness

– while the second signifies the pole supporting a ship's sails with all its associations of functionality, solidity and tangibility. This distinction could be read as a metaphor for Humbert's recognition that while in physical appearance women may be barely distinguishable, the body of one woman (the "terrestrial woman" with "pumpkins or pears for breasts") may signify the tangible solidity of a functional mast, while the body of another (the nymphet) may signify the intangible elusiveness of mist.

Humbert's implicit comparison of the differences in women to the differences in linguistic signifiers encourages the view that women like all objects of the ostensive world are signs which derive their identity in the world as a result of their difference from, or similarity to, other ostensive objects. The ostensive or "real" world is therefore, like language, a system of difference, in which the similarities and differences of its components are either recognized or repressed. The components of one system of difference (language) may be used to represent the components of another (the ostensive world) although the relation between the signifier and the signified is dependent on convention: it is not dependent on any necessary difference or similarity between the components of the sign.

THE LAW, THE FORBIDDEN AND UNCONSCIOUS DESIRE

The recognition that the relation between the signifier and signified is arbitrary has important implications for a concept of the law and the transgression of the law as

the following argument may demonstrate.

The society in which Humbert lives recognizes a difference in the sexuality of females only in terms of their age. Sexual maturity is represented in the signifier woman (female + adult) but not in the signifier girl (female + child). Humbert however recognizes sexual maturity by the terms woman (female + adult) and nymphet (female + child + magical), but not by girl (female + child + ordinary). This idiosyncratic refusal to conform to social convention may appear to be a "forerunner of insanity" (L p. 19). However, social convention is arbitrary, as HUMBERT's comparative description of the definition of the terms girl or female-child shows:

> Let me remind my reader that in England, with the passage of the Children and Young Persons Act in 1933, the term 'girl-child' is defined as 'a girl who is over eight but under fourteen years' (after that from fourteen to seventeen, the statutory definition is 'young person'). In Massachusetts, US, on the other hand, a 'wayward child' is, technically, one 'between seven and seventeen years of age' (who, moreover, habitually associates with vicious or immoral persons). Hugh Broughton, a writer of controversy in the reign of James I, has proved that Rahab was a harlot at ten years of age (L p. 19).

It would seem then that because the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, that signified which is designated child in one society is likely to be considerably different from that designated child in another. Furthermore, in some societies, sexual difference may not be considered relevant to the definition of childhood at all.

Once again the use of Lacanian theory may prove illuminating in this context. As already indicated earlier in this chapter, for Lacan, language is a principle part of a Symbolic Order of exchange which holds society together by allocating roles to individuals within the system. Linguistic nomination determines the place and therefore the exchange value of the individual. Within the Symbolic Order of Humbert's society, the exchange of sexual relations is permissible to two individuals who are classifiable firstly as heterosexual, male and female (but presumably not homosexual); and secondly as adult. While two adults may exchange sexual relations, an adult and a child may not, nor may two children (as was suggested in HUMBERT's description of the frustrating vetoes imposed on his relationship with Annabel Leigh). As a male adult, Humbert may therefore exchange sexual relations with a female adult, but not with a female child, since the latter exchange is "Other" than, or repressed by, the law. Thus a legal system, like a linguistic system and the ostensive world, operates as a system of difference: that which is unlawful is that which by virtue of its difference from the lawful must be repressed in order to give meaning or definition to the lawful.

By emphasizing the view that laws are determined by convention, and that the convention may change from one society or Symbolic Order to another, HUMBERT implies that that which is forbidden or Other is arbitrarily defined as such. However he simultaneously evades the possibility

that the transgression of the law and the attainment of the Other leads to the destruction of the order preserved by the law. Translated into terms of language, he evades the possibility that the attainment of the Other is outlawed by the system of difference in order to preserve "meaning". He therefore refuses to recognize that the transgression of the laws of linguistic difference will lead to the loss of "meaning" which these laws initially establish.

HUMBERT LE BEL: MLLE HUMBERT: JEAN-JACQUES HUMBERT AND HIS TRUTH

At the start of this chapter, attention was drawn to the implications of HUMBERT's remark, "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (L p. 9), which seemed to suggest that since it is in a murderer's interests to please his jury, he is likely to make linguistic choices which present his story in the light most advantageous to himself. Since HUMBERT is the author of the text, it might be supposed that he alone controls and interprets the discourse within the text. He is at liberty to adopt any subjective position he chooses as is clearly evident in the constant revision of the linguistic nominations he attributes to himself: he may for example be "Mlle Humbert – Berthe au Grand Pied" (L p. 65), or "Herr Doktor Humbert" (L p. 111), or simply "H.H." (L p. 307). He is moreover in a position to impose changes both deliberate or perhaps accidental on all discourses presented in the course of his confession be they quotations of other

publications, extracts of letters or representations of dialogues. For example, while commenting on the literature available to him in the prison library, HUMBERT transcribes a significant page of Who's Who in the Limelight. Although this transcription contains a concentration of signs for the reader, I shall for the present select only one for attention, the "error" occurring in the final paragraph which reads as follows:

> Quine, Dolores. Born in 1882, in Dayton, Ohio. Studied for stage at American Academy. First played in Ottawa in 1900. Made New York debut in 1904 in Never Talk to Strangers. Has disappeared since in [a list of some thirty plays follows.] (L p. 32, square brackets are HUMBERT's).

HUMBERT, commenting on this paragraph, draws attention to his error of transcription as follows:

> Born 1935. Appeared (I notice the slip of my pen in the preceding paragraph, but please do not correct it, Clarence) in The Murdered Playwright (L p. 32).

If initially the reader had noticed the error in HUMBERT's transcription, he may now believe that without HUMBERT's acknowledgement of this error, he would have had no yard-stick, no authority, to which to appeal, in order to verify his judgement. This must seem even more apparent to the reader who has not noticed the error, and must therefore recognize his dependence on HUMBERT for drawing attention to it at all. However, what HUMBERT does not seem to bargain for is the possibility that by the frequent changes of his subjective position, which he allows himself as

protagonist he may betray himself as confessant, and unwittingly draw the reader's attention to that which is "Other" or repressed by the particular subjective position he has previously adopted. An incident which demonstrates this particularly clearly is the account offered of Humbert's first marriage to Valeria Zborovski.

HUMBERT's first description of Valeria is offered from the position of a young man who has decided that marriage might help to purge him of his "degrading and dangerous desires" or "at least to keep them under pacific control" (L p. 25). Thus, in search of a suitable wife, Humbert is initially attracted to Valeria by the "imitation she gave of a little girl" (L p. 25):

> She looked fluffy and frolicsome, dressed à la gamine, showed a generous amount of smooth leg, knew how to stress the white of a bare instep by the black of a velvet slipper, and pouted, and dimpled, and romped, and dirndled, and shook her short curly blonde hair in the cutest and tritest fashion imaginable (L p. 26).

Valeria thus described, is the daughter of Humbert's doctor, and since she is temporarily inaccessible and initially a stranger to Humbert, her vivacity and cultivated girlishness have an allure for him akin to the Otherness of nymphancy. However this allure vanishes in a post-marital transformation:

> The bleached curl revealed its melanic root; the down turned to prickles on a shaved shin; the mobile moist mouth, no matter how I stuffed it with love, disclosed ignominiously its resemblance to the corresponding part in a treasured portrait of her toadlike dead mama; and presently, instead of a pale little gutter girl, Humbert Humbert had on his hands a large, puffy, short-legged,

big-breasted and practically brainless baba (L p. 26).

HUMBERT seems to attribute his disillusionment to the discovery of the "real" Valeria who had been hidden under a false appearance. However the features which he identifies as offensive in her such as her mouth, her short legs and her big breasts are not features which can have been easily disguised. The conclusion is therefore invited that this change described in Valeria is the product of a change in the subjective position of the describer rather than a change in the being described. Once he has married Valeria, Humbert views her as part of the order of the permitted, the accessible and the signifiable. Her Otherness and therefore her desirability seem to him to disappear. Yet if he believes that he has a "true" knowledge of Valeria, of her capabilities, her whereabouts and her activities, he fails to recognize that by attributing to her a particular identity and casting her in a particular role, he rejects as "false" all the alternatives by which this identity and role are given definition. When Valeria announces that "There is another man in my life" (L p. 27), she presents him with the revelation that his supposedly "true" perspective of her is arbitrary. Humbert is predictably outraged:

> A mounting fury was suffocating me — not because I had any particular fondness for that figure of fun, Mme Humbert, but because matters of legal and illegal conjunction were for me alone to decide, and here she was, Valeria, the comedy wife, brazenly preparing to dispose in her own way of my comfort and fate (L p. 28).

He is forced to recognize that his authority and control over Valeria are open to subversion. Judged from a position "Other" that Humbert's, namely from her Russian lover's perspective, Valeria the "brainless baba" and "figure of fun" becomes "Valechka," the "child-wife", worthy of tenderness and devotion. Her "Otherness" and desirability which were denied by Humbert are recognized by Maximovich.

If the reader is invited to witness the subversion of Humbert's authority as Valeria's husband, by the appearance of her lover, he is also presented with the possibility that the authority of a literary author in presenting "the truth" about a character may be subverted by an authorial or interpretive position Other than his own. However much he may attempt to close his text on a single meaning, the possibility will always remain that a change in interpretive position will allow the textual alternatives which have been repressed to manifest themselves in a new form of "the truth".

It therefore follows that if HUMBERT appears to revel in the undignified conclusion of the Maximovich marriage, he could be viewed as the author who attempts to exercise full control over a literary character by imposing upon her the final closure of death. First however, he reinforces her identity as a laughing stock:

> I had my little revenge in due time. A man from Pasadena told me one day that Mrs Maximovich née Zborovski had died in childbirth around 1945; the couple had somehow got over to California and had been used there, for an excellent salary, in a year-long experiment conducted by a distinguished American ethnologist. The

> experiment dealt with human and racial reactions to a diet of bananas and dates in a constant position on all fours. My informant, a doctor, swore he had seen with his own eyes obese Valechka and her colonel, by then grey-haired and also quite corpulent, diligently crawling about the well-swept floors of a brightly lit set of rooms (fruit in one, water in another, mats in a third and so on) in the company of several other hired quadrupeds, selected from indigent and helpless groups. I tried to find the results of these tests in the Review of Anthropology; but they appear not to have been published yet. These scientific products take of course some time to fructuate. I hope they will be illustrated with good photographs when they do get printed ... (L pp. 30-31).

The reader may notice that as his narrative authority HUMBERT cites the traditionally "incontrovertible" source of "the truth" – the doctor. Furthermore, the references to the imminent publication of the ethnological experiment in the Review of Anthropology might be regarded as increasing the truth-value of the story. However, in an immediately subsequent passage of the text, the "Other" or converse possibility of this "truth" is suggested: while convalescing after a "breakdown", Humbert is included on an expedition into Arctic Canada as a "recorder of psychic reactions" (L p. 33). Finding that his investigations are a source of irritation to the other members of the team, he takes the following course of action:

> ... I soon dropped the project completely and only toward the end of my twenty months of cold labour (as one of the botanists jocosely put it) concocted a perfectly spurious and very racy report that the reader will find published in the Annals of Adult Psychophysics for 1945 or 1946 as well as in the issue of Arctic Explorations devoted to that particular expedition (L p. 34).

This admission demonstrates the "Otherness" of the "truth"

claimed earlier: if scientific publications are recognized as reliable and a record of "fact", this recognition is dependent on the rejection of the possibility that such fact is actually invention. If at first HUMBERT presented "the truth" of the Valeria story from the position of one who respects the authority of science, he subverts the truth-value of the story by his subversion of the authority of science. If his "perfectly spurious and very racy report" is anything to go by, his "biography" of Valeria's misfortune is no more than an uproarious fiction. HUMBERT thus becomes "hoist with his own petard" and his own reliability as confessant is betrayed by his indulgence in subversion. It is on the basis of this betrayal that he is to describe to the reader his first encounter with Lolita.

LOLITA: OTHERNESS AND ITS ATTAINMENT

a. The discovery

Humbert's first encounter with Lolita is presented, not as the product of his own machinations, but as the product of a series of coincidences. Having been discharged from a sanitorium, he is looking for a summer retreat. An employee of his late uncle has an impoverished cousin, McCoo, who has a room in his home available to a lodger. Humbert finds the prospect of the room, the prospect of a nearby lake suitable for summer bathing, but most particularly the prospect of McCoo's twelve year old daughter, "perfectly perfect" (L p. 35). However, by chance McCoo's

house burns down. Again by chance, a friend of McCoo's, Charlotte Haze, has a room available and also by chance, as Humbert is to discover, she has a twelve year old daughter.

From this description it would appear that Humbert is the innocent victim of "Otherness" which manifests itself as a series of chance events which subvert his own decisions and lead him to his discovery of Lolita. He is thus presented by HUMBERT as the pawn of "the Other" rather than the quester after "the Other." However in the light of HUMBERT's previous self betrayal, the reader may suspect this interpretation as that of a confessant who seeks to excuse himself before his jury. Certainly HUMBERT's authorial control is made repeatedly apparent in comments such as,

> his house had just burned down — possibly owing to the synchronous conflagration that had been raging all night in my veins (L p. 35).

By suggesting that the figurative (Humbert's burning lust for a nymphet) might give rise to the "real" (the fire at McCoo's home), HUMBERT seems covertly to acknowledge that the relation of cause and effect, and therefore the "meaning" in a narrative sequence is the construct of the authorial consciousness rather than a pattern of truth inherent in the nature of events themselves. As W.W. Rowe comments, these devices which draw attention to the "reciprocal relationship between the real and the unreal, serve the purpose of pointing up the narrator's delightfully treacherous selection of what we are told."[16] What HUMBERT's

[16] William Woodin Rowe, Nabokov's Deceptive World (New York: New York University Press, 1971) p. 75.

narrative understates in this case is that, even if Humbert did not calculatedly seek out Lolita, it was his affinity for the "Otherness" of nymphancy that led him to accept McCoo's offer of summer lodging and ultimately made him vulnerable to the subsequent play of "the Other."

As a result of the McCoo fire Humbert finds himself in the presence of Charlotte Haze who is presented to the reader as follows:

> I think I had better describe her right away, to get it over with. The poor lady was in her middle thirties, she had a shiny forehead, plucked eyebrows and quite simple but not unattractive features of a type that may be defined as a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich. ... She was, obviously, one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul; women who are completely devoid of humour; women utterly indifferent at heart to the dozen or so possible subjects of a parlour conversation, but very particular about the rules of such conversations, through the sunny cellophane of which not very appetizing frustrations can be readily distinguished. I was perfectly aware that if by any wild chance I became her lodger, she would methodically proceed to do in regard to me what taking a lodger probably meant to her all along, and I would again be enmeshed in one of those tedious affairs I knew so well.
>
> But there was no question of my settling there. I could not be happy in that type of household with bedraggled magazines on every chair and a kind of horrible hybridization between the comedy of so-called 'functional modern furniture' and the tragedy of decrepit rockers and rickety lamp tables with dead lamps (L pp. 37-38).

If HUMBERT expressed frustration at the inadequacy of language to represent the mystery of nymphancy, he expresses no such uneasiness in describing Charlotte Haze since she conforms to the very stereotype which the conventions of language both initiate and allow to be reproduced. Her

conformity to "the norm" is identified by HUMBERT firstly in her "polished words," a phrase suggesting both the shine of repeated use and the studied articulation which favours elegant production of the signifier above the effective representation of the signified. It is also evident in her lack of humour. In terms of Lacan's identification of the joke as a manifestation of the Other, Charlotte's lack of humour might be interpreted as an indication of her repression of Otherness or linguistic play as that non-sense which would surely threaten the sense and order of the conventions by which she seems to set so much store. The only changes in convention which Charlotte does seem able to accept are those which the Laws of social order define as permissible. These changes are identified by HUMBERT in the "horrible hybridization" of the furniture which seems to stand witness to the frequent changes in the conventions of furnishing which are permitted by society. It is precisely such evidence of potential for change in convention which is irksome to Humbert who is frustrated by the law's inflexibility on the issue of sex with girl-children.

In his description of Charlotte Haze, HUMBERT is clear in his indication of where he considers the reader should stand in relation to such stereotypes. Firstly, with the presuppositions "one of those women," "one of those tedious affairs," and "that type of household" he indicates his assumption that the reader is already aware of the stereotypical. Then with the choice of the deictics "those"

and "that" he co-opts the reader as a sympathiser with his own critical view of the stereotype. Having thus established that "normality" is a wornout cliché he then introduces Lolita – the revelation of Otherness:

> I was still walking behind Mrs Haze through the dining-room when, beyond it, there came a sudden burst of greenery – 'the piazza', sang out my leader, and then, without the least warning, a blue-sea wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses.
>
> It was the same child – the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted handkerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day. And, as if I were the fairy-tale nurse of some little princess (lost, kidnapped, discovered in gypsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the kind and his hounds), I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. ...
>
> I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, the impact of passionate recognition (L p. 39).

The "Otherness" of Lolita is expressed in the unexpectedness of her appearance "without the least warning," suggesting a magical capriciousness that is the antithesis of Charlotte Haze's predictable conformity. The image of the "blue-sea wave" in which the cynical reader may detect the operation of the confessant's "fancy prose style," suggests Humbert's experience of "Otherness" as irrepressible even in the context of supposedly atrophied convention. With the reference to the Riviera, the "blue-sea wave" suggests the exoticism and incongruency of nymphancy in the staid setting of "green and pink Ramsdale," and implies a return to the lost paradise of the "princedom by the

sea." Once more HUMBERT indicates the incompatibility between nymphancy and the limits of the linguistic medium: "I find it most difficult to express with adequate force... ." His insistence that Lolita is "the same" as Annabel, with "the same frail honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair" identifies Lolita as "the Other" whose loss or absence was the "origin" of his unconscious Desire. With Lolita's appearance, the Haze home is transformed for Humbert into a potential paradise where union with the lost "Riviera love" and the consequent state of fulfilled bliss — the "happily ever after" of the fairy tale — seems not only possible but imminent. However, the obvious obstruction restraining such bliss is the presence of Charlotte Haze who, as Lolita's mother, could be seen in the role of the Lacanian "Symbolic Parent" standing as an affirmation of the Law and as the authority marking the place of "the Other" as that which is forbidden. Simultaneously she stands as the embodiment of that which is permitted: the "normal big mate" accessible to Humbert as the "normal big male." One might say that for Humbert as literary scholar, Charlotte Haze is a conventional text approved by linguistic law as "normal," while Lolita is the transgressive text implying subversive play with "the Other," or linguistic difference. A similar interpretation is offered by Julia Bader when she argues,

> While the theme of an affair between the lodger and the mother is an obvious cliché, the agonising love for a slangy twelve-year-old is a delectable taboo. ... ... it is possible, on one level, to regard the slangy,

> vulgar, irresistible nymphet as an embodiment of the possibilities inherent in the stock "wayward-child" character, or as an example of how "literary originality" can utilize a moral taboo for its subject. As I will try to show, moral taboo merges with literary taboo, and we get the supreme subject of literary originality posing as the main character of a novel about literary originality.[17]

b. Simulating the Attainment of the Other

Humbert's quest after the bliss of union with Lolita is described by means of a diary. Since by definition, a diary is a daily, and therefore supposedly "immediate", record of events, it might be supposed that the truth value of the diary would be high and would add credibility to HUMBERT's confession. This seems the supposition that Michael Bell works on when he comments in his article, "Lolita and Pure Art,"

> The early part of Humbert's narrative is based not simply on his memory but also on the diary he kept while at the Haze house, so that we have not just an earlier and later Humbert, but an earlier and later writer. We might describe this diary as ... actually pornographic. Like a scribbling on a jakes wall, it expresses the unrealisable or public unadmissable desire [sic] at a fairly simple and crude symbolic remove from actual fulfilment. And yet, as connoisseurs of such graffiti will testify, even that unpromising context can provide scope for a play of wit and a grosser kind of artistry.[18]

While Bell's comparison of the diary to graffiti seems plausible, his reference to the diary as a text which was

[17] Julia Bader, Crystal Land (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972) pp. 63-67.

[18] Michael Bell, "Lolita and Pure Art," Essays in Criticism, 24 (April 1974) pp. 178-179.

written prior to the confessional text of Exhibit Number One seems to overlook the warnings with which HUMBERT's introduction of the diary bristles. This introduction proceeds as follows:

> Exhibit Number Two is a pocket diary bound in black imitation leather, with a golden year, 1947, en escalier, in its upper left-hand corner. I speak of this neat product of the Blank Blank Co. Blankton, Mass, as if it were really before me. Actually, it was destroyed five years ago and what we examine now (by courtesy of a photographic memory) is but its brief materialisation, a puny unfledged phoenix.
>
> I remember the thing so exactly because I wrote it really twice. First I jotted down each entry in pencil (with many erasures and corrections) on the leaves of what is commercially known as a 'typewriter tablet'; then, I copied it out with obvious abbreviations in my smallest, most satanic, hand in the little black book just mentioned (L p. 40).

Although apparently authenticating the diary's existence by recording the name of its manufacturer, HUMBERT actually seems to imply that the diary is a fiction. Since the signifier "Blank", like "Zero" is commonly used to represent absence, the diary is described as a presence derived from absence — an imagined or fictional text. This suggestion that the diary is a fiction is reinforced by HUMBERT's admission that the document itself is no longer existent, but is being represented "by courtesy of a photographic memory." The accurate recall of events five years previous would seem a considerable challenge even to a memory that is supposedly "photographic." The text read by HUMBERT's jury is therefore the representation of the diary which represented the rough draft, which represented the "real" events of which only HUMBERT's assurances guarantee the

"reality". References to "many erasures and corrections" and "obvious abbreviations" seem only to confirm that the diary is a fiction within a confession. Far from being an "authentic document" it appears to be a device designed to give the reader the illusion of experiencing immediately Humbert's twenty-two-day co-existence with Lolita before she is dismissed by her mother to a summer camp. Watching the hunt from the privileged position of the hunter who stalks his prey, the reader is able to witness the implementation of various hunting strategies, the evasion of these by the prey, and the frequent intervention of the maternal presence which thwarts the progress of the hunt. As Humbert's frustration and Desire for the Other increases, so must the reader's Demand to know the outcome of his quest. At last Humbert declares, "the devil realized that I was to be granted some relief if he wanted to have me as a plaything for some time longer" (L p. 55). If Humbert's lust is to be partially relieved, so too is the reader's curiosity, with the narration of the following event.

On a Sunday in June, [19] Charlotte Haze departs alone for church after an altercation with Lolita whom she leaves at home with Humbert. After some preliminary horseplay on the davenport in the living-room, Humbert contrives the masturbatory performance of rubbing himself to the

[19] Carl Proffer has worked out "with a little Pninian research" that this Sunday is "June 21 (the summer equinox and, appropriately, a traditional day for pagan orgies in ancient and medieval times) ..." – Keys to 'Lolita' p. 46.

point of orgasm against Lolita's legs. In this scene Lolita is clearly cast in the role of the forbidden fruit: she holds "in her hollowed hands a beautiful banal Eden-red apple" (L p. 57) which she consumes, she herself seeming to Humbert "musical and apple-sweet." However, she seems oblivious of Humbert's bliss which in its final stages is described as follows:

> I was above the tribulations of ridicule, beyond the possibilities of retribution. In my self-made seraglio, I was a radiant and robust Turk, deliberately, in the full consciousness of his freedom, postponing the moment of actually enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves. Suspended on the brink of that voluptuous abyss (a nicety of physiological equipoise comparable to certain techniques in the arts) I kept repeating chance words after her — barmen, alarmin', my charmin', my carmen, ahmen, ahahamen — as one talking and laughing in his sleep while my happy hand crept up her sunny leg as far as the shadow of decency allowed (L p. 60).

While Humbert does not actually consume the forbidden fruit, he simulates its consumption; his masturbation could be regarded as the representation of actual transgressive intercourse with a nymphet. He effectively constructs a fictional world in which he can be "fantastically and divinely alone" with Lolita and where the law — embodied, for example, in Charlotte Haze — ceases to be effective. What contributes to the success of his enactment is its verbal accompaniment — the garbling of the Little Carmen song. Lolita is kept "under the spell" of the verbal play into which she enters with Humbert:

> The stars that sparkled, and the cars that parkled, and the bars, and the barmen, were presently taken

> over by her; her voice stole and corrected the tune I had been mutilating (L p. 58-59).

Thus Humbert's escape from the restrictions of social law is fused with his escape from the restrictions of the laws of linguistic difference. He plays with the lyrics of the song until the meanings of the signifiers defined by the repression of difference become blurred: for example, "carmen" becomes ironically transformed into the incantatory conclusion to prayer "ahahamen." Similarly the differences between "stars," "sparkled," "cars" and "parked" become confused in the neologism "parkled," a combination of sounds composing a signifier that, although possible phonologically in English, is not recognizable as belonging to the English lexicon, does not represent any known signified, and therefore is not a meaningful sign. If the law of difference rules that within a given signification, a signifier can only have meaning by virtue of the absence of those signifiers from which it differs, the transgression of the law by the indulgence in the play of difference allows the order of meaningful "sense" to be threatened by playful "non-sense". Humbert's simulation of sexual transgression is thus accompanied by the simulation of linguistic transgression. He does not construct a playful text, but only plays with a text the meaning of which has already been written and fixed. Thus it is possible for the disorder engendered by his playful transgression to be rectified by reversion to the original text.

While it may be possible to argue that Humbert's simu-

lation of the attainment of "the Other" is ingenious, daring and imaginative, it would seem nevertheless that it is only successful as a solipsistic activity. While as a representation or simulation of sexual and linguistic transgression it may not appear to inflict any harm on social or linguistic order, it is evident that if social and linguistic order are determined by the laws of difference, the representation of transgression must be as threatening in its implications as transgression itself. For the representation of transgression suggests that the actual transgression is possible even if its representation implies the absence of actual transgression from the immediate context.

In summary it would seem that sexually, this masturbation allows Humbert to approach in simulated form the sexual perfection of the attainment of the "Otherness" of nymphancy; linguistically the garbling of textual meaning suggests that numerous possible textual interpretations may be held in suspension thereby simulating the perfect state of "full meaning". Yet implicit in the action of masturbation with a girl-child is the threat of the destruction of social order; implicit in textual play is the threat of the destruction of the order of meaning <u>per se</u>.

c. <u>Eliminating the Symbolic Parent</u>

Initially delighted by the satisfaction he has achieved from simulating the attainment of Otherness and the sub-

version of the law, Humbert soon discovers the inadequacies of such simulation. Firstly, his Desire, which had appeared satisfied, returns: " ... desire even stronger than before, began to afflict me again" (L p. 62). Since he has only represented the fulfilment of his Desire and since representation implies the lack of the "real", his Desire is perpetuated in the absence implied by the signifiers with which he represented its satisfaction. Since it has been displaced onto these signifiers it is a Desire further alienated from Humbert and therefore more frustrated than before. In Lacan's words his Desire is "caught in the rails — eternally stretching forth towards the desire for something else — of metonymy."[20]

Furthermore, it becomes clear to Humbert that while Lolita had appeared "safely solipsized" this solipsism only lasted for the duration of the representation. Thereafter, she falls under the rule of the law by which she can once more be repressed — or dismissed to summer camp. It is therefore clear to Humbert that if his attainment of Lolita is to be sustained, he will have to devise a more permanent means of overcoming the law. This means presents itself in Charlotte's "love-letter" which suggests that Humbert "link up your life with mine for ever and ever and be a father to my little girl" (L p. 67). Humbert is quick to recognize how much being Father to his nymphet would increase both his accessibility to her and his control

[20] Jacques Lacan, Ecrits, p. 167. For an explanation of Desire as irreducible, see pp. 28-32 of my Introduction.

over her. Just how absolute he intends to make his authority is suggested in the following admission:

> I did not plan to marry poor Charlotte in order to eliminate her in some vulgar, gruesome and dangerous manner such as killing her by placing five bichloride-of-mercury tablets in her preprandial sherry or anything like that; but a delicately allied, pharmacopoeial thought did tinkle in my sonorous and clouded brain. Why limit myself to the modest masked caress I had tried already? Other visions of venery presented themselves to me swaying and smiling. I saw myself administering a powerful sleeping potion to both mother and daughter so as to fondle the latter through the night with perfect impunity (L p. 70).

Although this admission begins with a negation[21] the precision of the visualized poisoning emphasized by details such as "five bichloride-of-mercury tablets" and "preprandial sherry," suggests that thoughts of murder have crossed Humbert's mind already. If the reader's expectations of murder are aroused, they are likely to be promoted by subsequent sinister references. For example, with the reference to "the fifty days of our cohabitation" (L p. 77) Humbert implies the brevity of the marriage's duration; in introducing John Farlow to the reader he comments, "... it was he who got me the cartridges for that Colt and showed me how to use it, during a walk in the woods one Sunday" (L p. 78). More overtly he remarks, "A few more words about Mrs Humbert while the going is good (a bad accident

[21] In his discussion of the rhetorical feature "negative comparison" which he describes as "a figure especially typical of old Russian folklore but occurring to this day in both poetry and prose..." W.W. Rowe in Nabokov's Deceptive World draws particular attention to the positive descriptive force of such negation in Nabokov's work (p. 3).

is to happen quite soon)" (L p. 79). The reader may also bear in mind the more obscure "clue" that a copy of René Prinet's "Kreutzer Sonata" hangs above the bed in Humbert's room in the Haze home. In the novel of the same name by Tolstoy, the protagonist kills his wife — ironically, in a fit of jealous passion.[22]

At length the eradication of Charlotte Haze seems imminent:

> There was a woodlake (Hourglass Lake — not as I had thought it was spelled) a few miles from Ramsdale, and there was one week of great heat at the end of July when we drove there daily. I am now obliged to describe in some tedious detail our last swim there together, one tropical Tuesday morning (L p. 81).

The correction with which this passage begins seems itself an omen of Charlotte's doom. Up to this point HUMBERT has referred to the local Ramsdale lake as "Our Glass Lake" mimicking Charlotte's habit of co-opting into the order of comfortable convention various items such as "Our Great Little Town" (L p. 73) and "Our Christian God" (L p. 74). His sudden change to the homonym "Hourglass" seems to reflect Humbert's final rebellion against the order of Charlotte's world, and assertion of his own affinity for verbal play. It may also arouse temporal associations in the reader, for example the possibility that Charlotte's "time has come," or her "hours are numbered."

It is her attempt to impose final closure over her

[22] See Carl Proffer, Keys to "Lolita", p. 33.

relationship by banishing Lolita – "repressing the Other" – to a "good boarding school with strict discipline and some sound religious training" (L p. 82) that brings Humbert to his decision to rid himself of Charlotte's restrictive authority: "The natural solution was to destroy Mrs Humbert. But how?" (L p. 84). Following the earlier alternatives of poisoning and shooting, the alternative of drowning Charlotte is now presented, yet at the moment of execution Humbert stalls. His justification for this refusal is argued as follows:

> Nowadays you have to be a scientist if you want to be a killer. No, no, I was neither. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessarily coital, relation with a girl-child, are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who merely ask the community to allow them to pursue their practically harmless, so-called aberrant behaviour, their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation without the police and society cracking down upon them. We are not sex fiends! We do not rape as good soldiers do. We are unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentlemen, sufficiently well integrated to control our urge in the presence of adults, but ready to give years and years of life for one chance to touch a nymphet. Emphatically, no killers are we. Poets never kill (L p. 87).

In this argument HUMBERT's earlier sexualisation of poetic "natural genius" is developed in the overt identification of the sex offender with the poet. The dichotomy he establishes by comparing this identity with that of killer/scientist has interesting implications. Juxtaposed to the "poet", the "scientist" may regard himself as an "objective authority", a producer of "fact" or indisputable "truth" which he has derived from the application of laws

to matter. The "poet" on the other hand is more likely to regard himself as a "subjective" authority, a producer of opinion which is arbitrary and open to debate. In order to preserve the apparent indisputability of his position, the scientist is forced to discredit or repress any position which would threaten his own. It is this capacity in the scientist for imposing closure on meaning which HUMBERT identifies as a "killer instinct". The poet on the other hand, particularly the poet who has recognized the implications of the materiality of language, is likely to recognize his own inability to control fully either the play of language or the "meaning" which he may generate by poetic discourse. If he does not seek to establish one particular "truth" as infallibly right, he has no need to denounce alternatives which threaten his own views, but may indulge in the play of these alternatives.

By comparing poets, supposedly innocuous sex offenders or indulgers in the play of meaning, to scientists, supposedly ruthless murderers or repressers of the play of meaning, HUMBERT calculatedly disguises the possibility that the former "unhappy dog-eyed gentlemen" might pose as great a threat to the Symbolic Order as the latter. It is clear that murder and rape as overt acts of transgression cannot be condoned by social law.[23] Similarly,

[23] If within the anarchic context of war the rape of the good soldier, as Humbert implies, might be condoned, this is because his action is likely to be judged as the aggression of a defender of one Symbolic Order towards a member of the opposition; as such it does not stand as a threat to Symbolic Order <u>per se</u>.

the attempt to repress linguistic play completely cannot be permitted by linguistic law for "meaning" itself is dependent on a certain play of difference. Because the extremity of murder and rape make them easily recognizable by the law and therefore readily punishable, the threat they pose to the Symbolic Order is rapidly diffused. On the other hand, the apparently innocuous "little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation" threaten Symbolic Orders per se by their covert implication that such order is worthy of only extrinsic respect. The indulgence in the play of difference, instead of supporting the authority of a Symbolic Order, as the good soldier does, implies that the "authority" of all subjective positions is equally tenable and that the notion of supreme authority inherent in Symbolic Order is the tenuous product of consensus and convention rather than that of any "natural" supremacy. However, what is not foregrounded by Humbert's view is the fact that it is only by means of a Symbolic Order — despite its dependence on convention for its authority — that "meaning" can be established.

Finally then, Humbert does not murder Charlotte Haze; she is removed by a fatal accident. It could be argued that Nabokov, as McFate, relieves Humbert of the role of common murderer in order to preserve him for the more salacious role of child-seducer. Charlotte is therefore written out of the text as the victim of an accident. However, if Humbert is viewed as the "poetic intelligence" who is attempting to construct a "perfect context" in which the

Other is not repressed and "full meaning" is potentially brought into play, he can be interpreted as refusing to contradict or "kill" the law which prohibits his attempts as transgressive. Instead, he discovers that the law may be subverted by the manifestation of Otherness, the differences which by their repression have defined the authoritative position of the law. In this alternative set of circumstances the order preserved by the law is temporarily repressed, and that which was Other or different manifests itself. Under the initial order, it is accepted that Charlotte Haze is the beloved wife of Humbert; it is usual that she send her daughter to summer camp. It is also usual that the "Junk setter," a dog belonging to Charlotte's neighbours, chases passing cars. Usually these cars ignore the dog's onslaughts. Usually the asphalt pavement in front of the Haze home is dry and cracked. This order of the usual or accepted can be replaced by an alternative or unusual combination: Charlotte Haze discovers that she is the object of Humbert's scorn; she discovers that he is in love with her twelve year old daughter; she rushes out of her home to post letters which are the product of her latter discovery; she loses her footing on the asphalt pavement which is slippery after a recent watering; she plunges headlong into the car of Frederick Beale who has swerved to avoid the "Junk setter". Charlotte's position thus changes from authoritative parent in the first order to accident victim in the second.

If earlier in this chapter it has been argued that

the manifestation of Otherness frequently takes the form of jocularity or non-sense which threatens the order of sense, this non-sense is clearly evident throughout HUMBERT's description of the accident. Even his description of Charlotte's remains as "a porridge of bones, brains, bronze hair and blood" (L p. 98) is comically bizarre, for it contains a subversion of the taboos of both cannibalism, according to which the human body and human food are kept strictly separated, and death, according to which the remains of the dead should be treated with respect. HUMBERT not only suggests profanely that Charlotte's remains are comparable to a commonplace food-sort, but emphasizes the amorphous confusion of these remains by linking the signifiers "bones", "brains", bronze hair" and "blood" which represent the remains, with the alliterated consonant "b".

By taking advantage of a change of circumstances, an unexpected appearance of Otherness or difference in which the effectiveness of the law is temporarily repressed, Humbert is thus able both to avoid eradicating the law himself, and to gain accessibility to full play with the nymphic Other.

d. The Consummation

With Charlotte Haze's death, Humbert, ironically assuming the authority of Symbolic Parent to his nymphet, is at last able to realize his transgressive dreams. Fetching Lolita from Camp Q, he transports her to the Enchanted

Hunters Hotel, and feeds her one of the sleeping tablets he has procured for the purpose of her seduction. At this point, the distance between HUMBERT the enlightened confessant who has the advantage of hindsight, and Humbert the ignorant protagonist who quests blindly after the Other, is marked. Evoking once again the pattern of the fairy tale quest, HUMBERT presents his protagonist-quester as falling unwittingly under a spell the implications of which can only be estimated in retrospect.

> Human beings, attend! I should have understood that Lolita had already proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel, and that the nymphean evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that I had prepared for my secret delectation, would make the secrecy impossible, and the delectation lethal. I should have known (by the signs made to me by something in Lolita – the real child Lolita or some haggard angel behind her back – that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture. Oh, winged gentlemen of the jury! (L p. 124).

In HUMBERT's imperative address, "Human beings, attend!" the reader may detect a note of warning. Since he is viewing the progress of events from the unenlightened perspective of the protagonist, he is more in a position to learn from the fate of a fellow human being than in a position to sit in judgement over him. Moreover, as indicated earlier, the reader's quest runs in conjunction with Humbert's quest. While the latter seeks the attainment of sexual perfection by union with a nymphet, or the attainment of "full meaning" in textual perfection by the attainment of linguistic Otherness, the reader seeks the attainment of the "full truth", by the unveiling not only of HUMBERT's "truth", but of

that which his truth has sought to repress or distort. Only once he has read the confession to its conclusion will the reader, like Humbert, come to recognize the "evil" inherent in the attainment of Otherness.

Even before he has attempted to seduce Lolita, Humbert is confronted with warnings that the Other, once attained, will not be what it promises to be before its attainment. For example, convinced of his mastery over Lolita he describes his "final picture" of her:

> Naked, except for one sock and her charm bracelet, spread-eagled on the bed where my philtre had felled her — so I fore-glimpsed her; a velvet hair ribbon was still clutched in her hand; her honey-brown body, with the white negative image of a rudimentary swimsuit patterned against her tan, presented to me its pale breastbuds; in the rosy lamplight, a little pubic floss glistened on its plump hillock (L p. 124-125).

Yet when he opens the bedroom door he sees her in "the darkness of the bedroom":

> Clothed in one of her old nightgowns, my Lolita lay on her side with her back to me, in the middle of the bed. Her lightly veiled body and bare limbs formed a Z. She had put both pillows under her dark tousled head; a band of pale light crossed her top vertebrae (L p. 127).

The contrast between the "rosy lamplight" of the first description and the "darkness" of the second; the eroticism of the first child naked and spread-eagled, and the demureness of the second clothed in an old nightgown and lying in an inaccessible "Z" position with her back turned; the vulnerability of the first child and the comical opportunism and selfishness of the second lying "in the middle

of the bed" and appropriating "both pillows"; all these differences indicate the unpredictability of the Other, and its potential to operate beyond the control of the author. Both this unpredictability and the tendency of the Other to subvert the author's control are evident in HUMBERT's description, not of Humbert's seduction of Lolita, but of his seduction by Lolita:

> My life was handled by little Lo in an energetic, matter-of-fact manner as if it were an insensate gadget unconnected with me. While eager to impress me with the world of tough kids, she was not quite prepared for certain discrepancies between a kid's life and mine. Pride alone prevented her from giving up; for, in my strange predicament, I feigned supreme stupidity and had her have her way — at least while I could still bear it. But really these are irrelevant matters; I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A great endeavour lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets (L p. 133).

As the climax of Humbert's quest to attain a nymphet, this scene has been a focal point of critical debate, at the heart of which is predictably the question of how severely Humbert's actions should be judged by the reader. Common to the conclusions drawn seems to be the experience of a certain ambivalence towards Humbert. On one hand Lionel Trilling argues that the reader is likely to feel a "loss of certitude" about his moral feelings:

> ... it is likely that any reader of Lolita will discover that he comes to see the situation as less and less abstract and moral and horrible, and more and more as human and "understandable"[24]

[24] Lionel Trilling, "The Last Lover," p. 14.

Another critic, Mark Lilly, draws attention to the comical effect of the scene which, he argues, tends to undermine the weight of any moral judgement:

> ... both the deaths [the deaths of Charlotte Haze and of Clare Quilty] and the sexual scenes are hilariously funny; and it is precisely this type of grotesquerie that confuses the reader's moral assumptions[25]

Alfred Appel draws attention to the possibility that Humbert's displacement of responsibility onto Lolita might simply be another distortion of evidence on HUMBERT's part to evade culpability for the seduction:

> Because Lolita seduces Humbert she might seem to be the agent of immorality, but the irony is another trap in the game: this is just the kind of easy release from culpability which we are too ready to accept; it does not mitigate the existence of their ensuing two years together, nor the fact that Humbert has denied Lolita her youth, whatever its qualities may be[26]

I would argue that any ambivalence which the reader does experience towards the scene of the consummation is the product of something more than HUMBERT's shrewd interpretation of his own crime as the responsibility of Lolita. After all, if Humbert is questing after possession of the forbidden nymphet, is the reader not repeating his transgressive Desire by questing after revelation of the "full truth" of this salacious confession? What Humbert discovers at the final unveiling of the mystery is that the Phallus

[25] Mark Lilly, "Nabokov: Homo Ludens," in Vladimir Nabokov — A Tribute, ed. Peter Quennel (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979) p. 96.

[26] Alfred Appel, "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody," p. 126.

is quite Other than he thought it to be: the innocence and modesty he anticipated are replaced by initiated precociousness. The reader however, is not even permitted to witness a "final unveiling." If he hoped to be witness to a "full" account of the forbidden — a rape of a child by a paederast — his hopes are to be subverted, not only by the comical seduction of the bemused sex offender by a precocious "teeny-bopper," but by the censoring of the "full truth" by the confessant. The reader has quested energetically only to be told at the moment of full revelation that,

> ... these are irrelevant matters; I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality (L p. 133).

I would suggest that the "loss of certitude" which Lionel Trilling describes arises from the reader's disappointment at being denied full revelation, yet his (perhaps guilty) awareness that such denial is what preserves HUMBERT's description from becoming sordid and boringly blatant pornography. If Humbert was to experience the tragedy of lost meaning in "full attainment," HUMBERT knows better than to repeat his mistake. He tells only enough to illustrate the nature and implications of his transgression. Similarly, at the level of the discourse, the reader may notice that he has indulged in only enough play with linguistic Otherness to show how threatening to the order of sense such play can be. At no point yet has he allowed the "meaning" of his text to deteriorate into the suspension of sense in "full play" with the Other.

PART II

THE SUSPENSION OF MEANING: EVADING SYMBOLIC LAW

In retrospect, it is impossible for HUMBERT to offer a linguistic demonstration of the consequences of Humbert's sexual attainment of Otherness, without running the risk of incurring the same disastrous loss of meaning which Humbert faces after his transgression. Yet the description of the consequences of the latter's sexual attainment of Otherness provides a clear indication of what the corresponding textual consequences would be.

Having transgressed the law and brought the Other into play, Humbert's immediate objectives become to sustain his activity of play with the Other, and simultaneously to attempt to evade punishment by the law for his transgression. In order to do this, he is forced to devise an existence beyond or outside the law. Since it is impossible for him to remove himself from human society altogether, the best alternative that he is able to contrive is the nomadic life of tourism. By evading a "proper place" in any one Symbolic Order or social context, he is able to sustain his relationship with Lolita — he is able to keep the Other in play — while nevertheless encountering severe problems.

First of all, beyond enabling him to maintain play with the Other, his journey has no clear direction. This lack of direction is reflected in HUMBERT's text which

becomes a playful juxtaposition of perceptions and locations. The scarcity of finite verbs suggests that agency, determining purpose or meaning in the journey, has been suspended. For example,

> Indian ceremonial dances, strictly commercial. ART: American Refrigerator Transit Company. Obvious Arizona, pueblo dwellings, aboriginal pictographs, a dinosaur track in a desert canyon, printed there thirty million years ago, which I was a child (L p. 155).

As this passage illustrates, HUMBERT's frequent use of irony invites unexpected meaning, for example, "Indian ceremonial dances," which might initially be assumed to be religious, yet which are subsequently qualified as "strictly commercial." Similarly ART does not apply to aesthetic masterpieces but to a trucking company. Since Humbert is attempting to live on the "nymphic island of entranced time," the sustained record of time which characterized the first part of the confession – for example in the form of the diary – is abandoned. Instead, the temporal continuum seems suspended; for example, in HUMBERT's comment "printed there thirty million years ago, when I was a child," the prehistoric and the contemporary become strangely fused.

This absence of any clear direction in the journey is accompanied by Humbert's difficulty in controlling Lolita as the Other. He is forced to adopt two strategies to maintain his position as author-ity: firstly he threatens to impose "total closure" on her by exiling her to a dilapidated Appalachian farmhouse or in other words completely withdrawing her from play. He also points out

to her that if she subverts his authority completely by exposing him as kidnapper and rapist, she will, without him, simultaneously expose herself to the closure imposed by the Department of Public Welfare where the laws of the Symbolic are most rigidly enforced. Secondly, Humbert attempts to construct "meaning" or "purpose" in their journey/text by devising short-term goals towards which their otherwise meaningless play can be directed:

> Every morning during our yearlong travels I had to devise some expectation, some special point in space and time for her to look forward to, for her to survive until bedtime. Otherwise, deprived of a shaping and sustaining purpose, the skeleton of her day sagged and collapsed (L p. 149).

Thus, having defied the conventions of the Symbolic Order, conventions such as spatio-temporal laws by which the meaning of the text is created, having attempted to escape such order by attaining "that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes" (L p. 17), Humbert is forced to reconstruct these conventions if he is not to lose control completely over the nymphic Other.

Humbert's decision to adopt the nomadic life of a tourist is likely to have a significant effect upon the reader of the confession. In the following remarks for example, Alfred Appel refers to the apparently frequent criticism of Part II of the confession as "less interesting" than Part I:

> ... 'I am not concerned with so-called "sex" at all,' Humbert says (p. 136) (L p. 133); on the contrary, Nabokov is very much concerned with it, but with the

> reader's expectations rather than Humbert's machinations. 'Anybody can imagine those elements of animality,' he says, and yet a great many readers wished that he had done it for them, enough to have kept Lolita at the top of the bestseller list for a year, although librarians reported that many readers never finished the novel. The critics and readers who complain that the second half of Lolita is less interesting are not aware of the possible significance of their admission.[27]

To elaborate on Appel's remarks, I would argue that, on one hand, Humbert, having transgressed the law and attained the forbidden Other, is confronted with the meaningless life which his transgression has produced. Only the repeated threat of being discovered and punished provides him with any clear motivation. For the reader, on the other hand, the promise of a spicy, taboo story is transformed in the second part of the narrative into a witty, playful, but directionless discourse in which "meaning" occasionally threatens to become suspended altogether. Once the unknown Otherness has been translated into the known and iterable it loses its mysteriousness and consequent fascination. Only the likelihood of the arrest and punishment of the criminal remains to lure the reader on.

To return once more to HUMBERT's confession, one of the most alarming consequences which Humbert is forced to face once he has secured Lolita as his mistress is the discovery of her unpredictably strong attraction for other men. He recalls for example,

> Oh, I had to keep a very sharp eye on Lo, little limp Lo! Owing perhaps to constant amorous exercise,

[27] Alfred Appel, "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody," p. 123.

> she radiated, despite her very childish appearance, some special languorous glow which threw garage fellows, hotel pages, vacationists, goons in luxurious cars, maroon morons near blued pools, into fits of concupiscence which might have tickled my pride, had it not increased my jealousy ... I had only to turn away for a moment — to walk, say, a few steps in order to see if our cabin was at last ready after the morning change of linen — and lo and behold, upon returning, I would find the former les yeux perdus, dipping and kicking her long-toed feet in the water on the stone edge of which she lolled, while, on either side of her, there crouched a brun adolescent whom her russet beauty and the quicksilver in the baby folds of her stomach were sure to cause to se tordre — oh Baudelaire! — in recurrent dreams for months to come (L pp. 157 + 159-160).

Humbert's oscillation between a position of authoritative control over Lolita to a position of losing control over her is reflected in the discourse with which HUMBERT describes this predicament. The reader cannot be certain, for example, whether HUMBERT himself has managed "to keep a very sharp eye" on the various irruptions which "lo" makes into this passage in phrases such as "lo and behold" and "she lolled."

It may also be noticed in this passage that HUMBERT frequently indulges in the use of French phrases. Since French is foreign or "Other" to English its inclusion in an English text seems yet another invitation to the play of difference, its presence suggesting the possibility of extending linguistic play beyond the boundaries of a single language. While at this point Humbert is portrayed as the instigator of play, he is later to become its victim: for example, when reading a letter addressed to Lolita which he believes to have been written by her school-friend

Mona Dahl, he fails to recognize the linguistic play which suggests the identity of the actual author. The play occurs in the following context:

> "As expected, poor Poet stumbled in Scene III when arriving at the bit of French nonsense. Remember? Ne manque pas de dire à ton amant Chimène, comme le lac est beau car il faut qu'il t'y mène. Lucky beau! Qu'il t'y – What a tongue-twister! Well, be good, Lollikins. Best love from your Poet, and best regards to the Governor. Your Mona" (L p. 221).

Missing the sense in the "French nonsense," the Quilty in "Qu'il t'y," Humbert also fails to recognize that "your Poet" might be the Other author who is about to abduct his nymphet and that he might be more appropriately named the "Governed" than the "Governor" at this stage of events.

It is the possibility of losing Lolita to another suitor which initially alarms Humbert when he discovers that she appeals to other men. For once he has removed Lolita from her place propre as an orphaned child in Ramsdale where she was protected by the law of the Symbolic Order as the Other who is inaccessible, Humbert finds that in contriving her accessibility for himself, he has simultaneously rendered her accessible to others. If earlier he had argued that nymphic magic was appreciated only by the Madman and the Artist, it seems that now his transgression has transformed that magic into a readily accessible and therefore devalued commodity. A similar point is made by Robert T. Levine when he introduces his discussion of the loss of Lolita's childhood with the following argument:

> Lolita the Nymphet dwells on an enchanted island whose boundaries are not spatial but temporal: the age limits of nine and fourteen. Humbert Humbert aspires to live out his days on that island. ... In his desperate effort to climb onto the island, he pulls Lolita off it into the unenchanted ocean of adulthood too soon.[28]

If during the course of the first tour of America HUMBERT is able to lay claim to the bliss which he had envisaged as the product of cohabitation with a nymphet, the nature of this bliss seems by definition beyond the reach of the reader's comprehension. For as the following description suggests, such bliss can have no meaningful representation in language:

> Oh, do not scowl at me, reader, I do not intend to convey the impression that I did not manage to be happy. Reader must understand that in the possession and thraldom of a nymphet the enchanted traveller stands, as it were, beyond happiness. For there is no other bliss on earth comparable to that of fondling a nymphet. It is hors concours, that bliss, it belongs to another class, another plane of sensitivity. Despite our tiffs, despite her nastiness, despite all the fuss and faces she made, and the vulgarity, and the danger and the horrible hopelessness of it all, I still dwelled deep in my elected paradise — a paradise whose skies were the colour of hell-flames — but still a paradise (L p. 164).

Humbert's "bliss" then, is a form of "enchantment" which defies the differences between "happiness" and "unhappiness", or "ecstasy" and "agony", but allows the combination of both in a state of being that is beyond the control or representative powers of language. Since language can only establish meaning on the basis of difference, the

[28] Robert T. Levine, "'My Ultraviolet Darling': The Loss of Lolita's Childhood," Modern Fiction Studies, 25, 3 (Autumn 1979) p. 471.

abolition of difference must concomitantly result in the attainment of a state beyond conventional "meaning" — a state of transcendence which by definition cannot be shared.

The strain which this state of transcendence or suspended meaning imposes on its author necessitates an inevitable return to the order of the Symbolic. Humbert's choice of new home is in the Eastern town of Beardsley where he may assume the role of visiting lecturer at Beardsley College, while Lolita may return to her supposed place propre at Beardsley School for girls. Humbert assumes the role of father and Lolita the role of daughter. Thus the first directionless journey concludes:

> And so we rolled East, I more devastated than braced with the satisfaction of my passion, and she glowing with health, her bi-iliac garland still as brief as a lad's, although she had added two inches to her stature and eight pounds to her weight. We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tyres, and her sobs in the night — every night, every night — the moment I feigned sleep (L p. 173).

Gradually it seems, the implications of his transgression begin to become evident to Humbert. What he had envisaged as a blissful relationship with his nymphet proves to be a sordid defilement of a twelve year old girl's childhood. As Denis de Rougemont points out, the attainment of nymphancy which Humbert had envisaged as "'the supreme joy,' the höchste Lust of the dying Isolde" fails because,

> ... in reality Humbert Humbert and Lolita have never

> known what I call 'unhappy reciprocal love.' Lolita has never responded to the fierce and tender passion of her elder lover. Hence the failure of the Myth [the myth of Tristan] and the 'savagely facetious' tone of the novel.[29]

Despite his rhetorical skills, his wit, his extensive vocabulary and knowledge of literature, HUMBERT is unable to translate his bliss into linguistic terms or to present his crime to his jury as "acceptable". Ultimately, he cannot evade the sterile desolation of his transgressive life with his miserable step-daughter.

THE PLAYFUL TEXT AND THE ORDER OF THE SYMBOLIC: Humbert and Lolita in Beardsley

If the reader experienced a suspension of his Demand during the directionless journey of Humbert and Lolita across America, this Demand is likely to be stimulated once more by their return to the college town of Beardsley. The immediacy of social order and propriety once again foregrounds the transgressive nature of their relationship and augments the threat of exposure and punishment. In the process of establishing a place for himself and Lolita in the society of Beardsley, Humbert is necessarily brought into contact with social authorities. For example, having entered Lolita at Beardsley School for girls, Humbert is obliged to have an interview with "headmistress Pratt". As the following passage may indicate, this interview is

[29] Denis de Rougemont, "Lolita, or Scandal," in The Myths of Love, trans. Richard Howard (London: Faber and Faber, 1964) pp. 51-53.

a parody of the jargon of education theory and popular media:

> "We are not so much concerned, Mr Humbird, with having our students become bookworms or be able to reel off all the capitals of Europe which nobody knows anyway, or learn by heart the dates of forgotten battles. What we are concerned with is the adjustment of the child to group life. This is why we stress the four D's: Dramatics, Dance, Debating and Dating. We are confronted by certain facts. Your delightful Dolly will presently enter an age group where dates, dating, date dress, date book, date etiquette, mean as much to her as, say, business, business connections, business success, mean to you, or as much as [smiling] the happiness of my girls means to me. Dorothy Humbird is already involved in a whole system of social life which consists, whether we like it or not, of hot-dog stands, corner drugstores, malts and cokes, movies, square-dancing, blanket parties on beaches, and even hair-fixing parties! Naturally at Beardsley School we disapprove of some of these activities; and we rechannel others into more constructive directions. But we do try to turn our backs on the fog and squarely face the sunshine" (L p. 175, square brackets are HUMBERT's).

The irony evident in this passage suggests Pratt's inability to control the excess of meaning which she unwittingly, but repeatedly brings into play in her discourse. For example, during the course of the interview the correct form of Humbert's name constantly eludes her: it slips from "Mr Humbird," to "Dr Humburg," to "Mr Humberson" to "Dr Hummer" and with each transformation a corresponding set of transgressive associations is brought into play. The reader may associate "Humbird" with the recent description of hummingbirds in a town on the Mexican border, "There and elsewhere, hundreds of grey hummingbirds in the dusk, probing the throats of dim flowers" (L p. 155). The erotic associations of assault and penetration in this description

seem clearly evocative of Humbert's relationship with Lolita. The name "Humburg" might remind the reader of Humbert's reservation at the Enchanted Hunters hotel, the night of his first intercourse with Lolita:

> "The name," I said coldly, "is not Humberg and not Humbug, but Herbert, I mean Humbert ..." (L p. 117).

Then, it was "Humbert the Hummer" who played the main character of the sexual scenario on Sunday morning in June at the Haze home in Ramsdale (L p. 57). As Pratt slips from one transformation of Humbert's name to another, she simultaneously evokes the frequent changes of subjective position he has adopted during his playful interaction with his nymphet.

Lolita on the other hand, not only undergoes the transformations of "delightful Dolly," "Dorothy Humbird," "Dorothy Hummerson" – all comically distorted versions of "Dolores Humbert"– but like her father/lover, she is ironically misinterpreted by Pratt:

> "... Your delightful Dolly will presently enter an age group where dates, dating, date dress, date book, date etiquette, mean as much to her as, say, business, business connections, business success, mean to you."

The primary irony provoked is that since Humbert shows no apparent interest in "business," "delightful Dolly" according to Pratt's logic is likely to be completely bored by "dating." After being for a year the mistress of an adult male of hearty sexual appetite, Lolita is hardly likely to show any interest in the tame initiatory sexual

activities of dating that Pratt assumes will fascinate her.

Pratt's apparently innovative theory of education summarized in the neat formula of the "four D's" — a parody of rudimentary education by the "three R's", Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic — is unlikely to accommodate Humbert's precocious child-mistress. It is not surprising therefore that Lolita is soon to prove beyond the control of both Pratt and her staff, and that her subversion of their discipline manifests itself as a saucy delight in verbal taboo. As Pratt is to complain in a subsequent interview with Humbert:

> "Dolly has written a most obscene four-letter word which our Dr Cutler tells me is low-Mexican for urinal with her lipstick on some health pamphlets which Miss Redcock, who is getting married in June, distributed among the girls, ..." (L p. 195).

Most amusing is the suggestion that Lolita's overt play with linguistic taboos is somewhat obscure and barely competes with the "obscenities" which Pratt herself produces by her unconscious juxtapositioning of "health pamphlets," "Redcock" and "marriage."

While Lolita assumes the role of rebellious schoolgirl, Humbert attempts to play the role of a conventional father. His sole associate in Beardsley is another covert transgressor, his colleague and friend, Gaston Godin. Like "H.H.", "G.G." has a taste for fruit vert. He enjoys the company of faunlets as Humbert enjoys the company of nymphets. In mitigation of his own actions, HUMBERT presents

Gaston as an illustration of a "sex offender" who was permitted to enjoy his "throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessarily coital relations" (L p. 87) without the police or society of Beardsley "cracking down on him." What HUMBERT's envy of Gaston Godin's circumstances reveals is the ambiguous, or undecidable status of the phantasy of transgression in relation to Symbolic Order. It seems that in the society of Beardsley, as long as Godin's transgression is restricted to phantasy, to "knowing by name all the small boys in our vicinity," or "feeding them fancy chocolates with real liqueurs inside – in the privacy of an orientally furnished den in his basement ..." (L p. 179), he remains "crooned over by the old and caressed by the young." It takes the overt transgression of becoming "involved in a sale histoire, in Naples" (L p. 181) to incur the intervention of the law and the rejection of Godin. In "G.G.'s" case then, it appears that a boundary is drawn between "real" transgression and the phantasy of transgression. While the former is treated as punishable by the law, the latter is not. However, it becomes clear that this boundary is arbitrary when the law decides to recognize the phantasy of transgression as a form of participation in the "real" act. The text of Lolita itself provides a clear illustration of this. As a phantasy of transgression, this text has been treated both as an imaginary participation in the "real" act of paederasty and therefore inadmissibly subversive or "to-be-censored", and yet

on the other hand it has also been treated as belonging to an order Other than the "real" and therefore not punishable as a "real" transgression.

For all his envy of Godin, Humbert himself remains a "real" transgressor living in fear of punishment by the law. During their sojourn at Beardsley, he initially maintains control over Lolita by a system of monetary bribes. At this stage of their cohabitation, the bliss of the attainment of the Other degenerates to sordid prostitution. It is only his fear that her earnings will enable her to escape him that decides Humbert to substitute financial payment with permission to participate in the school's theatrical programme. Unwittingly, he thereby provides her with the opportunity to play roles other than those which he, Humbert, has prescribed for her. While appearing to remain under his authority, she slips further and further from his control. As HUMBERT himself admits in retrospect,

> By permitting Lolita to study acting I had, fond fool, suffered her to cultivate deceit. It now appeared that it had not been merely a matter of learning the answers to such questions as what is the basic conflict in "Hedda Gabler"?, or where are the climaxes in "Love Under the Lindens"?, or analyse the prevailing mood of "Cherry Orchard"; it was really a matter of learning to betray me (L p. 228).

Lolita becomes increasingly vulnerable to the interpretations and influences of Other "authorial" positions, one manifestation of which is Clare Quilty. Despite the obvious differences in his perspective, Brent Harold makes a similar observation in his article "Lolita: Nabokov's Critique of Aloofness" when he argues,

> In Part 2, as Humbert loses the manipulative aloofness which the reader has been led to associate with aesthetic distance, he finds himself for the first time out-authored, to use a metaphor suggested by the novel, in his own life. Previous annoyances — such as the defection of his ex-wife Valeria — have served only to emphasize Humbert's attitudinal and verbal authority; now, however, other hands without his permission begin to make marks on his page. One of the unauthorized authors is fate itself, personified either as McFate, or as "absurd builders" who "as soon as they had erected a sufficient amount of material to spoil [Humbert's view of nymphets playing in a schoolyard] suspended their work and never appeared again" (181) [L p. 176]. Lolita herself reverses the roles of part I, manipulating the manipulator by her various deceptions. ...
>
> But the greatest threat to Humbert's authority comes from the professional playwright Quilty.[30]

While Harold identifies the "unauthorized authors" as fate, personified either as McFate or as "absurd builders" it has already been proposed that these unidentifiable producers of meaning are manifestations of the Other which subverts Humbert's authorial control in the play of difference. At this point in the text the Other, as the locus of the individual unconscious, manifests itself in the "person" of Clare Quilty.

It is only in retrospect that Humbert becomes aware of Quilty's influence over Lolita during her participation in the Beardsley School production of his play The Enchanted Hunters. At the time Humbert is only aware that Lolita is beginning to lead a life that defies his authority. His attempts to discipline her make him only more desperately aware of her increasing independence.

[30] Brent Harold, "Lolita: Nabokov's Critique on Aloofness," Papers on Language and Literature, 11 (Winter 1975) p. 78.

It is finally Lolita who makes the proposition that she and Humbert leave Beardsley and embark on another journey:

> 'Look,' she said as she rode the bike beside me, one foot scraping the darkly glistening sidewalk, 'look, I've decided something. I want to leave school. I hate that school. I hate the play, I really do! Never go back. Find another. Leave at once. Go for a long trip again. But this time we go wherever I want, won't we?'
> I nodded. My Lolita.
> 'I choose? C'est entendu?' she asked wobbling a little beside me. Used French only when she was a very good little girl (L p. 205).

Each of her utterances is a curt declaration of her own autonomy: "Look, I've decided"; "I want"; "I hate". The French which she uses "only when she was a very good little girl," is an index to the transgression of Symbolic Law which her life with Humbert has fostered, and which she now practises to her own advantage in order to subvert his control. Humbert is no longer the decision-maker as HUMBERT poignantly seems to acknowledge in his nostalgic retrospective aside, "My Lolita."

THE SECOND JOURNEY AND THE LOSS OF THE PLAYFUL OTHER

As the second journey begins HUMBERT presents the reader with an overt warning:

> I now warn the reader not to mock me and my mental daze. It is easy for him and me to decipher now a past destiny; but a destiny in the making is, believe me, not one of those honest mystery stories where all you have to do is keep an eye on the clues. In my youth I once read a French detective tale where the clues were actually in italics; but that is not McFate's

> way — even if one does to learn to recognize certain obscure indications (L p. 209).

In this warning the reader may recognize HUMBERT's cynicism towards the concept of a world that inherently manifests meaning. Humbert, as protagonist surrounded by the play of numerous possible meanings, is unable to recognize or establish a particular pattern of meaning, until in retrospect he adopts a particular fixed subjective position — the position of HUMBERT the confessant — from which he can impose a particular interpretation on his experiences. Thus if the confession is to develop the characteristics of a detective novel such as the quest to solve the mystery of the identity of Humbert's rival and Lolita's abductor, HUMBERT refuses to follow the convention of foregrounding particular signs as signifiers for the reader. It is therefore impossible for the reader to establish the identity of Humbert's rival, as it is for Humbert himself to do so. Ironically even when clues are provided in italics, for example Qu'il t'y (L p. 221), it is not likely that the reader will recognize their significance.

On his first odyssey with Lolita, Humbert had been conscious of the power of two forces to deprive him of his nymphet. On one hand he ran the risk of apprehension by the police for his crime of child-abduction; on the other hand he ran the risk that other admirers might in their turn abduct Lolita from him. On his second odyssey the precariousness of his position is increased by the

diminishment of his authority over Lolita. His only certain form of defence against threats of intervention appears to be his pocket automatic:

> ... 'Particularly well adapted for use in the home and car as well as on the person.' There it lay, ready for instant service on the person or persons, loaded and fully cocked with the slide locked in safety position, thus precluding any accidental discharge. We must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Urfather's central forelimb (L p. 214).

The presence of the gun seems to promise at last fulfilment of one of the first questions that the text might have provoked in the reader, the question of who Humbert eventually murdered.

While HUMBERT's comparison of the gun to the phallus may be dismissed as another parodic gibe at Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the Lacanian translation of Freudian sexual imagery in linguistic terms adds a further dimension to this passage. If the gun is translated as the Phallus rather than the phallus, Humbert's faith in his Phallic gun, his power to signify, is to prove ill-founded, for he is soon to discover that the Phallus is the possession of Other unknown authors who like him are fascinated by the prospect of play with the forbidden nymphet. If initially he suspects then that his shadow is "a detective whom some busybody had hired to see what exactly Humbert Humbert was doing with that minor stepdaughter of his" (L p. 215), he gradually recognizes that this shadow is his rival. For there is no doubt that the Other is also the possessor of the phallus/Phallus:

> There he stood, in the camouflage of sun and shade ... his hirsute thighs dripping with bright droplets, his tight wet black bathing trunks bloated and bursting with vigour where his great fat bullybag was pulled up and back like a padded shield over his reversed beasthood (L p. 235).

Even his car has phallic qualities: "... a red hood protruded in somewhat codpiece fashion ..." (L. p. 212).

That Clare Quilty can be interpreted as Humbert's Double seems the consensus of numerous critics.[31] However what appears to be missing from discussions of the nature and role of Quilty in HUMBERT's text is an elucidation of his paradoxical nature as both a part of Humbert, yet not a part; the same as Humbert yet different from him. This paradox is suggested both in HUMBERT's description of Quilty as "my shadow" (L p. 218), and in the more comprehensive descriptions, for example,

> I saw him scratch his cheek and nod, and turn, and walk back to his convertible, a broad and thickish man of my age, somewhat resembling Gustave Trapp, a cousin of my father's in Switzerland – same smoothly tanned face, fuller than mine, with a small dark moustache and a rosebud degenerate mouth (L p. 216).

Here Quilty's similarity to Humbert in age and family resemblance are balanced by the difference in facial shape and the presence of the moustache which Humbert had once considered growing (L. p. 48).

[31] For example: Alfred Appel, "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody," p. 127. Julia Bader, Crystal Land, p. 70 & 74. G.M. Hyde, Vladimir Nabokov – America's Russian Novelist (London: Marion Boyars, 1977) pp. 115-122. L.L. Lee, Vladimir Nabokov (London: George Prior, 1976) p. 120. Robert Levine, "'My Ultraviolet Darling': The Loss of Lolita's Childhood," p. 473. Robert Merrill, "Nabokov and Fictional Artifice," Modern Fiction Studies, 25 (1979) p. 453.

The possibility that "quilted Quilty" (L p. 304), as Humbert's Other, is the collection or compound of subjective positions which in their difference from Humbert's give definition to his identity, is supported by Julia Bader who remarks that the name Quilty "... denotes the idea of his being a patchwork of a number of characters."[32] Bader's reading also corroborates the view of Quilty as an alternative authorial position which reveals the "Other perspective" of play with a nymphet. Although it is in HUMBERT's interests to interpret his crime as the action of an artist who is infinitely susceptible to, and appreciative of, the mysteriousness of nymphancy, from the Other position of Quilty — the position which Humbert had attempted to repress — play with a nymphet is no more than the sordid indulgence of a pervert. As Bader argues,

> Quilty, ... as a rival, is a practitioner of thoroughly conventional art. He is a "public" author; he appears in cigarette ads and teenage magazines, and makes pornographic movies. He also "likes little girls," and the prison Who's Who informs Humbert that Quilty's "many plays for children are notable," such as The Little Nymph (in which Lolita plays the main character in the Ramsdale production). Quilty makes use of art in a cold, calculating way, he has no creative power (significantly, he confesses to Humbert that he did not enjoy Lolita because he is impotent); he uses Lolita for a brief scene and then discards her.
>
> The amorphous figure of Quilty is a threat to the artistic integrity of Humbert's creation.[33]

Although Humbert attempts to repress the existence of this Other which takes the form of a threatening shadow, he

[32] Julia Bader, p. 73.

[33] Julia Bader, p. 73.

cannot evade the fact that Lolita is now beyond his control. Repeatedly she threatens to disappear from him completely and he is forced to recognize that any semblance of authority that he had over her is no longer effective. Eventually his worst fears are fulfilled and she is abducted by "Uncle Gustav" on Independence Day.[34] Humbert the bereft author/lover/father is left only with his gun/Phallus and the freedom to use it – "I still had my gun, and was still a free man – free to trace the fugitive, free to destroy my brother" (L p. 245).

THE CRYPTOGRAMMIC PAPERCHASE

Once he has lost Lolita, Humbert embarks on a vain quest after her and her abductor. He attempts to follow the textual network of signs which Quilty appears to have left in various hotel registers. In following the frag-

[34] Carl Proffer offers the following calculations whereby this date can be deduced:

> "Humbert is in a nearby motel when Quilty checks Lolita out of the Elphinstone hospital just after two o'clock. The date can be deduced. That very day as Humbert lay ill: "... there was some great national celebration in town judging by the firecrackers, veritable bombs, that exploded all the time ..." (p. 247). At five minutes to two he receives a solicitous phone call from the hospital; he assures the nurse he won't visit until the next day. But the next day he learns that Lolita had checked out of the hospital – and his life – just after two o'clock. In the next chapter, buried not too obtrusively in a passage describing Humbert's itinerary for June and July, he notes that Lo and he had reached Elphinstone "about a week before Independence Day" (p. 249). Quilty, with a Nabokovian sense of irony, had contrived to liberate Lolita from Humbert on the Fourth of July. But lucky Humbert does not make the connection and is spared the cruel wit." – Keys to Lolita p. 7.

ments of this text, Humbert ceases to be the "author" inviting and controlling the play of the Other, but must take instead the role of the reader faced with establishing meaning from playful signifiers which seem recognizable as signs yet which refuse to fit satisfactorily into an order of clear signification. He becomes fearfully conscious that he is the object or victim of meanings which play beyond his control. As Brent Harold argues, it is Quilty,

> ... (as Trapp) who by his playful manipulation and dropping of hints makes Humbert feel throughout most of part 2 that he is less an artist than a character in somebody else's book.[35]

HUMBERT recounts his humiliations as follows:

> 'Oh,' I would say, 'I am almost positive that I stayed here once — let me look up the entries for mid-June — no, I see I'm wrong after all — what a very quaint name for a home town, Kawtagain.' (L p. 246).

On other occasions the elusiveness of the literary allusions is more frustrating:

> ... 'N.S. Aristoff, Catagela, NY'? What was the sting in 'Catagela'? And what about 'James Manor Morell, Hoaxton, England'? 'Aristophanes', 'hoax' — fine, but what was I missing? (L p. 249).[36]

[35] Brent Harold, "Lolita: Nabokov's Critique on Aloofness," p. 78.

[36] Once again Carl Proffer's research is interesting:

"Catagela is the punningly comic name of a nonexistent city in Aristophanes' Archarnians (l 606). The name is derived from the Greek verb katagelao, "to sneer", "to smirk." This is the "sting" Humbert does not feel. James Mavor Morell is one of the characters in George Bernard Shaw's Candida and Hoxton is one of the towns where the play is set." — Keys to Lolita, p. 15.

Humbert's vain pursuit of Quilty and Lolita is reminiscent of his earlier quests after nymphic Otherness in Ramsdale. At that time he had felt himself to be the plaything of a power beyond him, some devil who was using Lolita as the means of torment:

> ... for all the devil's inventiveness, the scheme remained daily the same. First he would tempt me — and then thwart me, leaving me with a dull pain in the very root of my being (L p. 55).

Now once again Lolita is affiliated with a "demoniacal", malicious gamester:

> ... he succeeded in thoroughly enmeshing me and my thrashing anguish in his demoniacal game. With infinite skill, he swayed and staggered, and regained an impossible balance, always leaving me with the sportive hope — if I may use such a term in speaking of betrayal, fury, desolation, horror and hate — that he might give himself away next time. He never did — though coming damn close to it (L p. 247).

While Humbert's earlier quest had been characterized by his obsessive wish to attain the Other, his second quest is punctuated by a series of recognitions. Firstly, he becomes increasingly aware of the many similarities between his rival and himself:

> The clues he left did not establish his identity but they reflected his personality, or at least a certain homogeneous and striking personality; his genre, his type of humour — at its best at least — the tone of his brain, had affinities with my own. He mimed and mocked me. His allusions were definitely highbrow. He was well-read. He knew French. He was versed in logodaedaly and logomancy. He was an amateur of sex lore (L p. 247-248).

Secondly, Humbert reaches the conclusion that while he

is still susceptible to the attractions of nymphancy, he no longer envisages their attainment, but respects their forbidden nature:

> I would be a knave to say, and the reader a fool to believe, that the shock of losing Lolita cured me of pederosis. My accursed nature could not change, no matter how my love for her did. On playgrounds and beaches, my sullen and stealthy eye, against my will, still sought out the flash of a nymphet's limbs, the sly tokens of Lolita's handmaids and rose-girls. But one essential vision in me had withered: never did I dwell now on possibilities of bliss with a little maiden, specific or synthetic, in some out-of-the-way place; never did my fancy sink its fangs into Lolita's sisters, far far away, in the coves of evoked islands. That was all over, for the time being at least (L p. 255).

While the ideal of play with the Other is still profoundly fascinating to Humbert, and while he still is the victim of Desire, he has abandoned the phantasy of attaining Otherness in a state of transcendent perfection. At this point his relationship with Rita, the substitute for Lolita seems to reflect his agreement to compromise between the sublime but taboo relationship with a nymphet and the tedious but conventional relationship with "ordinary" women. In Rita there is a blend of the transgressive and the permissible which renders her a comfortable companion to Humbert. Being "three-quarters" his age, she does not carry the sexual taboo of childhood which defined Lolita as forbidden fruit. However, Rita does have the traces of nymphic charm, "the oddly prepubescent curve of her back, her ricey skin, her slow languorous columbine kisses" (L p. 257) that comfort Humbert. If she is neither subtle nor intelligent, she is "such a good sport," an appreciator of nonsense, farce

and antics but not of rare wit. Rita, like a nymphet, is sexually attractive; however she does not possess the subtle Otherness recognizable only by Artists and Madmen, but instead the unremarkable attraction of accessible difference which is freely played with and discarded by innumerable lovers. Her promiscuity is suggested in Humbert's remark that while she had "recently divorced her third husband — and a little more recently had been abandoned by her seventh cavalier servant — the others, the mutables, were too numerous and mobile to tabulate" (L p. 256). During her cohabitation with Humbert, she becomes involved with a variety of men: "a pretty awful crook" (L p. 257), "Roland MacCrum" (L p. 259), "a pocket-sized wizened truculently tight old man" (L p. 261); yet none of these passing infidelities disturbs Humbert. He seems to accept them as an inherent part of the accessibility which had made her available to him in the first place. He comments, "I dare say she would have given herself to any pathetic creature of fallacy, an old broken tree or a bereaved porcupine, out of sheer chumminess and compassion" (L p. 256). If it is not stretching a point to interpret a pun on the word "fallacy" (phallus-y) it could be argued that Rita is the embodiment of obvious, accessible linguistic play which is easily recognized and freely played with by all linguistic subjects as possessors of the Phallus.

It has already been argued that the latter portion of HUMBERT's confession follows the pattern of a detective

novel in which the quest object is Humbert's rival. It is only after three years, when Lolita, transformed into the undistinguished, pregnant and impecunious housewife, Dolly Schiller, appeals to Humbert for financial assistance, that the identity of his rival is disclosed.

Gun at the ready, Humbert traces Lolita to her previous address at "10 Killer Street," and thereafter to "Hunter Road, last house." During the course of their strained conversation Lolita reveals the name of her abductor. HUMBERT's description of this revelation is fascinating from a Lacanian perspective. It is recalled as follows:

> She said really it was useless, she would never tell, but on the other hand, after all — 'Do you really want to know who it was? Well, it was —'
>
> And softly, confidentially, arching her thin eyebrows and puckering her parched lips, she emitted, a little mockingly, somewhat fastidiously, not untenderly, in a kind of muted whistle, the name that the astute reader has guessed long ago.
>
> Waterproof? Why did a flash from Hourglass Lake cross my consciousness? I, too, had known it, without knowing it, all along. There was no shock, no surprise. Quietly the fusion took place, and everything fell into order, into the pattern of branches that I have woven throughout this memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment; yes, with the express and perverse purpose of rendering — she was talking but I sat melting in my golden peace — of rendering that golden and monstrous peace through the satisfaction of local recognition, which my most inimical reader should experience now (L p. 270).

The primary irony of this passage is that, even for a remarkably astute reader, the name of the seducer is almost certain to remain concealed. HUMBERT, without giving the reader the name, only assures him that he ought to know it, or more tantalizingly, that he does know it. The name —

the answer to the riddle — has been woven into the textual discourse and awaits recognition. Yet, even with HUMBERT's assurance, the reader is unlikely to be able to translate this apparently unconscious knowledge into the conscious. A page later, HUMBERT translates it for him as he recounts Dolly Schiller's continued conversation:

> Did I know — it had been horrid of her to sidetrack me into believing that Clare was an old female, maybe a relative of his or a sometime lifemate — and oh, what a close shave it had been when the Wace Journal carried his picture (L p. 271).

This passage then, translates what had appeared untranslatable. "Clare" which conventionally signifies "woman" is revealed to signify "man." If earlier the reader had read "Clare Quilty" as "female playwright" and therefore irrelevant to his quest for the name of a male sexual pervert, he is now allowed to recognize the ambiguity he had overlooked.[37] Furthermore, if he takes up HUMBERT's clue, "Waterproof. Why did a flash from Hourglass Lake cross my consciousness?" he may, in a form of textual "regression," trace his way back to the "primal scene" in which the repression of the ambiguity and the subsequent misunderstanding of the name "Clare Quilty" first arose. The day Humbert had contemplated drowning Charlotte Haze at Hour-

[37] It may be that the astute reader will have noticed HUMBERT's retrospective reference to Clare Quilty as male, for example, in his quotation of the prison copy of Who's Who (L pp. 31-32). However, following the perspective of Humbert who is oblivious of this ambiguity at the time of his affair with Lolita, it is most likely that the reader would either overlook, or even forget, such clues.

glass Lake, Jean Farlow, who had been painting in the woods surrounding the lake appeared on the scene. Their conversation ran like this:

> From the debouchment of the trail came a rustle, a footfall, and Jean Farlow marched down with her easel and things. ...
> 'I almost put both of you into my lake,' she cried. 'I even noticed something you overlooked. You [addressing Humbert] had your wrist watch on in, yes, sir, you had.'
> 'Waterproof,' said Charlotte softly, making a fish mouth.
> Jean took my wrist upon her knee and examined Charlotte's gift, then put back Humbert's hand on the sand, palm up.
> 'You could see anything that way,' remarked Charlotte coquettishly.
> Jean sighed, 'I once saw,' she said, 'two children, male and female, at sunset, right here, making love. Their shadows were giants. And I told you about Mr Tomson at daybreak. Next time I expect to see fat old Ivor in the ivory. He is really a freak, that man. Last time he told me a completely indecent story about his nephew. It appears —'
> 'Hullo there,' said John's voice (L pp. 88-89, square brackets are HUMBERT's).

With the name "Ivor," Jean Farlow refers to Ivor Quilty, uncle of Clare Quilty. John Farlow's arrival and the consequent interruption of Jean Farlow's anecdote, causes two "repressions" to take place. Firstly the name "Clare Quilty," which is likely to have come to light in the anecdote, is repressed so that Humbert and therefore the reader, fail to make the connection between Ivor Quilty's nephew and Clare Quilty, or in other words, the connection that "Clare Quilty" is ambiguously a female name which represents a man. Secondly, Jean Farlow's "indecent" story is "censored" and with it the knowledge of Clare Quilty's profane sexual tastes. The "meaning" that remains after the re-

pression is that Ivor Quilty has an indecent nephew, and that Clare Quilty who is not mentioned in this conversation, is a female playwright who works with her partner, Vivian Darkbloom.

To return to Humbert's revelation then: if up to this point Humbert has viewed himself as Lolita'a appreciative lover, he now is able to recognize the Otherness in his role — the perversion of a child-violator. Like Oedipus, like Special Agent Wallas, he finds that he has pursued a relentless quest after an anonymous criminal, only to discover that he himself is clearly guilty — Clare Quilty.[38]

REPRESSING THE TRANSGRESSIVE OTHER: THE "DEATH" OF CLARE QUILTY

If Humbert's mistake was to transgress the law by playing with the forbidden nymphic Other in the hope of attaining a state of "transcendent perfection", he now recognizes the failure of his aspirations and resolves to "murder" or repress the playfulness of his own transgressive Other.

The setting of Quilty's home, Pavor Manor, in which Humbert's final encounter with his Other takes place, has an unreal, dreamlike or fictional character, rationally accounted for in HUMBERT's narrative as the effects of the aftermath of a thunderstorm, of Humbert's "alcoholic

[38] I owe this pun to Appel, "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody," p. 127.

stimulation," and of the strangely unguarded front door which swings open "as in a medieval fairy tale" (L p. 292). This suggestion of unreality prevails throughout the confrontation of Humbert with Quilty, for although Humbert has planned the latter's execution with deadly logic, the resolution of his actions and the progress of his plan are constantly threatened by the intrusion of "non-sense" and the unexpected. This problem presents itself simultaneously at the level of the reading, for this scene refuses interpretation as either simply "real" — a part of Humbert's conscious experience — or as "unreal" — an imagined event. Any attempt to read it as part of Humbert's biography, as the brutal, vengeful murder of a rival in love, is liable to be subverted by repeated irruptions of the comical, fantastic and bizarre, which mock the sense and order of any rational reading.

Where earlier then, Quilty had been the unrecognized shadow who hovered on the periphery of Humbert's "artistic" world, now the converted Humbert intrudes into the decadent luxury of Quilty's "den" as the unrecognized, lurking shadow. This is illustrated when Humbert, beginning his "closure of play" by "turning whatever keys in whatever locks there were and pocketing them with my free hand" (L p. 293), comes unexpectedly upon Quilty as the latter emerges from the bathroom. Quilty, however, does not appear aware of his presence:

> ... he swept by me in a purple bathrobe, very like one I had. He either did not notice me, or else dis-

> missed me as some familiar and innocuous hallucination — (L p. 293).

While Quilty wears the purple bathrobe of the formerly sensuous, decadent Humbert, the converted Humbert, a "raincoated phantasm," wears under his raincoat "a black suit, a black shirt, no tie" (L p. 294) of Quilty's dark repressor. As already indicated however, this repression or "murder" of the guilty self is by no means easily executed. Play constantly threatens the resolution of Humbert's actions. When, for example, he unwraps what should be his carefully oiled gun, he finds it absurdly befouled: "I think I got the wrong product; it was black and awfully messy" (L p. 293). And if the oily gun is to be read as the Phallus, Humbert's verbal confrontation with Quilty is confounded by the slipperiness of the signifier. Quilty has a penchant for logodaedaly and like the former transgressive Humbert, interpolates smatterings of French and literary references into his discourse. As Humbert attempts to eliminate the ambiguities in their conversation and force Quilty to understand the particularity of his crime, Quilty evades Humbert's accusations by introducing digressions and verbal play into their dialogue:

> 'People,' he said, '... people invade this damned house without even knocking. They use the vaterre, they use the kitchen, they use the telephone. Phil calls Philadelphia. Pat calls Patagonia. I refuse to pay. You have a funny accent, Captain.'
> 'Quilty,' I said, 'do you recall a little girl called Dolores Haze, Dolly Haze? Dolly called Dolores, Colo.?'
> 'Sure, she may have made those calls, sure. Any place, Paradise, Wash., Hell Canyon. Who cares?'
> 'I do, Quilty. You see, I am her father.'
> (L p. 294-295).

While Quilty evades reminders of his earlier cryptogrammic play, Humbert identifies himself in his proper place as Lolita's father who has the right to take her seducer to task. Occasionally both Humbert and Quilty seem to lose control of their own utterances, for example, Quilty burbles "... Woolly-woo-boo-are?" as if lost in the play of the French sounds, "Voulez-vous boire?" while Humbert on the other hand becomes lost in the convolutions of English syntax, "I said I had said I thought he had said he had never — (L p. 294).

When Humbert eventually attempts to shoot Quilty, his gun at first does not go off at all, and when on the second attempt it does, the sound it makes seems to Humbert "ridiculously feeble and juvenile ... The bullet entered the thick pink rug, and I had the paralysing impression that it had merely trickled in and might come out again" (L p. 296). When Quilty knocks the gun out of his hand, it slides beyond the reach of both of them under a chest of drawers. The struggle which ensues, focusing on the possession of the gun/Phallus, is the struggle for authorial supremacy. In the fight for possession of the signifying power, the contending subjective positions of Self and Other are temporarily indistinguishable as one asubjective, struggling conglomerate:

> We rolled all over the floor, in each other's arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us (L p. 297).

Even when Humbert, having regained his dominant position, attempts to shoot Quilty, he realizes that each attempt to use his "power of signification" on the Other, seems to provide the latter with the opportunity for further play:

> ... in distress, in dismay, I understood that far from killing him I was injecting spurts of energy into the poor fellow, as if the bullets had been capsules wherein a heady elixir danced (L p. 302).

What begins as the stealthy stalking of the victim by the murderer, explodes into a carnival of "non-sense" as the murderer pursues the victim in a series of kangaroo jumps "remaining quite straight on straight legs while bouncing up twice in his wake," and the victim, like a clown who uses even death as material for comedy, refuses to be silenced. Even in "death", the macabre image of the victim, "a quarter of his face gone," is transformed into bizarre comedy by the detail of "two flies beside themselves with a dawning sense of unbelievable luck" (L p. 303). Evocative of the earlier description of Charlotte Haze's "porridge of bone, brains, bronze hair and blood" (L p. 98), the taboos of death and cannibalism are profaned by the anthropomorphised flies, and the implication that the corpse is a goodly feast.

As Humbert departs from Pavor Manor, he announces to Clare Quilty's friends who have assembled in the drawing-room for drinks, that he has murdered the playwright. The response he receives supports the interpretation of

his "murder" as an "interior" or "private" repression rather than a literal action. The three responses, "Good for you"; "Somebody ought to have done it long ago"; and "I guess we all should do it to him some day" suggest that the kind of "killing" Humbert has performed is more relevant to himself than to anyone else. It is an iterable action that anybody can perform. Furthermore, it does not have the finality of literal murder, for even when he has been "conclusively" silenced, the Other is able to emerge again, to "crawl out on to the landing," so that HUMBERT's assurance that Quilty subsides "for ever this time, in a purple heap" cannot be entirely trusted. After so many refusals of closure, the reader may come to expect the reappearance of the Other as inevitable. Thus, although Humbert, departing, affirms to himself that this is "the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty" (L p. 304), a playfulness, subdued to wry absurdity still hovers about his narrative:

> With a heavy heart I left the house and walked through the spotted blaze of the sun to my car. Two other cars were parked on both sides of it, and I had some trouble squeezing out (L p. 304).

Thus Humbert's exit from the "stage of play" is made to the comically profane sound of grinding motorcar bodywork.

IN CONCLUSION

Once Humbert has "killed" Quilty, there is little more to tell, "... the rest is a little flattish and faded"

(L p. 304). To enliven this flatness, Humbert decides,

> ... not by way of protest, not as a symbol, or anything like that, but merely as a novel experience — that since I had disregarded all laws of humanity, I might as well disregard the rules of traffic (L p. 304, my emphasis).

With this "novel experience," Humbert's travels, HUMBERT's confession, and NABOKOV's novel, approach their respective conclusions. As Humbert swerves to avoid a road-block, his car leaves the road and comes to rest high on a grassy slope. Waiting for the arrival of the police and the ambulance men, Humbert recalls the following scene:

> And while I was waiting for them to run up to me on the high slope, I evoked a last mirage of wonder and hopelessness. One day, soon after her disappearance, an attack of abominable nausea forced me to pull up on the ghost of an old mountain road that now accompanied, now traversed a brand new highway, with its population of asters bathing in the detached warmth of a pale-blue afternoon in late summer. After coughing myself inside out, I rested a while on a boulder, and then, thinking the sweet air might do me good, walked a little way toward a low stone parapet on the precipice side of the highway. Small grasshoppers spurted out of the withered roadside weeds. A very light cloud was opening its arms and moving toward a slightly more substantial one belonging to another, more sluggish heavenlogged system. As I approached the friendly abyss, I grew aware of a melodious unity of sounds rising like vapour from a small mining town that lay at my feet, in a fold in the valley. One could make out the geometry of the streets between blocks of red and grey roofs, and green puffs of trees, and a serpentine stream and the rich, ore-like glitter of the city dump, and beyond the town, roads criss-crossing the crazy quilt of dark and pale fields, and behind it all, great timbered mountains. But even brighter than those quietly rejoicing colours — for there are colours and shades that seem to enjoy themselves in good company — both brighter and dreamier to the ear than they were to the eye, was that vapoury vibration of accumulated sounds that never ceased for a moment, as it rose to the lip of granite where I stood wiping

> my foul mouth. And soon I realized that all these sounds were of one nature, that no other sounds but these came from the streets of the transparent town, with the women at home and the men away. Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapour of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic — one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord (L pp. 305-306).

The particularly striking feature of this reminiscence is the change of tone which it manifests: it is devoid of the digressive playfulness which throughout the confession has threatened to divert the reader's attention away from the textual message toward the code by which that message is represented. Suddenly it would seem that the Desire to play with linguistic difference and expose the arbitrary nature of meaning is superseded by the Desire to reduce the play of difference and delimit the meaning of the text precisely. This delimitation is established by the overt patterning of the text. The image on which this patterning focuses is "the melody of children at play." At first this melody is perceived by Humbert as "a melodious unity of sounds rising like vapour from a small mining town." It seems that the elements of concord and delicate ephemerality are identified as peculiar to the sound, since these elements are apparent in each reference to it: "that

vapoury vibration of accumulated sounds," "this vapour of blended voices," "that musical vibration" and finally "that concord." However, the sound is also described by the juxtaposition of contradictory adjectives: it is "majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic." Each adjectival couple suggests the ambivalence of Humbert's response to the sound as both unremarkable, yet simultaneously mysterious or Other, as that which defies satisfactory representation in language, since its Otherness can only be indicated by semantic contradiction.

Reinforcing Humbert's experience of this "melody" is the concord which he notices in his surroundings and which he interprets by personifying various features of the scene as members of an harmonious community: the old mountain road is described as "accompanying" the new highway; the asters "bathe" in the afternoon warmth; two clouds are personified as an embracing couple — "a very light cloud was opening its arms and moving toward a slightly more substantial one" — the abyss Humbert approaches is "friendly," and the colours of the distant view are "quietly rejoicing."

Syntactically, the many co-ordinations, subordinations, parenthetical elaborations and qualifications are all directed towards the finer definition of the harmony of the scene. Devices such as alliteration in, for example, "Small grasshoppers spurted" or "criss-crossing the crazy quilt" seem to reinforce at the level of the signifier the semantic

connection that is being made at the level of the signified. If there is potential for semantic play in the passage — for example, the use of the word "quilt" in "criss-crossing the crazy quilt" may evoke in the reader the expectation of a play on "quilted Quilty" — the digression of such play is not invited to disrupt the cohesion of the discourse.

What this reminiscence seems to emphasize then is that Humbert has come to appreciate the concord which is only possible if the Otherness of the forbidden is respected and allowed to occupy its place as the inaccessible. By making twelve year old Dolores Haze his "Lolita", he violated the very Symbolic Order which gave her her nymphic charm and transformed her into a devalued, easily accessible plaything. Only when he finds that he has lost Lolita for ever, when she becomes transformed into Dolly Schiller, does Humbert realize that he loves rather than Desires her. Furthermore, he would have been able to continue to love her had he been content, from the start, to take his proper role as her father, and allowed her to remain one of the children whose playful cries he now so poignantly respects.

HUMBERT's confession, then, reaches full circle as Humbert experiences the conversion, a process described by William Spengemann as follows:

> Conversion completes both the doctrinal lesson of faith and the form that was projected by the initial distinction between the self-deluded protagonist and the self-aware narrator. When the protagonist gives way to the narrator, his story ends. At the same instant,

> the narrator is born to tell the story already told. The end joins the beginning to form an endless circle, which is at once the figure described by the narrative, the symbol of mortal life made eternal by faith, and the mystical emblem of God.[39]

As Humbert becomes HUMBERT, the "tangle of thorns" of the confession reaches full circle, evoking the Christian image of the crown of thorns, the symbol of suffering in the interest of common salvation. If Humbert had made the fatal error of believing that a state of transcendent perfection was attainable in play with the Other, as HUMBERT he has been able to record the tragedy of his experience as a lesson to the reader. If the latter had hoped initially to discover the "full truth" of Humbert's transgression, and had thereby re-enacted Humbert's mistaken Desire for "full revelation", he may appreciate in retrospect that he has been spared the consequences of his mistake by HUMBERT's enlightenment. The latter has refused to represent "full play with the Other" either by graphic sexual description which would render the forbidden boringly accessible, or by unrestricted linguistic play which must result in the loss of any "meaning".

In conclusion, the common dilemma of the enlightened confessant, the dilemma of demonstrating how the enlightened subject proceeds in his newfound wisdom, is resolved by Humbert Humbert's acknowledgement that he must die. Just as the nymphic Lolita has "died" in the transformation to pale, bespectacled, pregnant Dolly Schiller, so

[39] William Spengemann, pp. 15-16.

Humbert Humbert, the ravisher of nymphets "dies" in the process of his conversion to a law-abiding, child-honouring, father-figure. Humbert Humbert acknowledges his "death-sentence" by requesting that his "memoir" – which might by its educated wit, rhetorical skill and irresistible humour, have defended his "life" – be published "only when Lolita is no longer alive." If the reader, then, as jury-man is tempted to sympathize with Humbert's Desire for play with the Other in spite of its "tragic" consequences, this sympathy is repressed by Humbert Humbert himself as not permissible. H.H.'s only respite then, is to "die" before he is tried. The lives of Lolita and Humbert Humbert close with the conclusion of the text that created them. However, for the "benefit of old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of the 'real' people beyond the 'true' story" (L p. 6), John Ray Jnr provides the overt closure:

> 'Humbert Humbert' ... died in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis, on November 16, 1952, a few days before his trial was scheduled to start. ... Mrs 'Richard F. Schiller' died in childbed, giving birth to a still-born girl, on Christmas Day 1952, in Gray Star ... (L pp. 6-7).

Yet if Humbert Humbert and Lolita must be "dead" or textually closed before the memoir is published, they are paradoxically immortalized within the "eternal circle" of the confession.

* * * * *

CHAPTER FOUR

THE READER AS TEXTUAL UNCONSCIOUS

IN HENRY JAMES'S WHAT MAISIE KNEW

> ... the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses.
>
> — Jacques Derrida

Before beginning this final chapter of my thesis, I want to pause briefly to outline the central issues I have discussed in the three preceding chapters. In Chapter One, I explored the possibility that reading, instead of being regarded as the quest to "unveil the truth" of the text, may be seen as the quest to discover what the textual discourse must undertake to conceal so as to make an "unveiling of the truth" possible. Then, in the second chapter, I discussed the possibility that narrative is an effect of reading – an effect produced by an irresolvable conflict or mystery that reproduces itself in its reader as the Desire to make meaning or find a resolution. In the third chapter, I explored the identity between the Desire to transgress social law (in particular sexual law) and the Desire to transgress linguistic law, and the social and linguistic implications of an attempt to satisfy Desire by attaining the forbidden Other. Now in this, the last chapter of the thesis, I aim to some extent to synthesize these various issues in a reading of Henry James's novel What Maisie Knew.

Let me begin by remarking that a special fascination of What Maisie Knew – and one of the reasons why I have chosen it as the text with which to end this thesis – is the insight with which it engages with problems which were only to be overtly identified and explicated by theorists such as Freud and Lacan years after the publication of this novel. In brief it is the account of a little girl's

quest for "knowledge" or "meaning" within the confusion which arises from her parents' divorce and subsequent adulterous affairs. The challenge which Maisie Farange faces is to know and understand her world when the very dynamic principle according to which that world operates – the principle of "sexual Desire"[1] – is that which is most studiously hidden from her. What the reader, following Maisie's quest might first of all ask is, what are the implications of a quest for knowledge in which the unknown would appear to be the sexual?

Now I pointed out in the Introduction to this thesis (vide pp. 28-32) and again in Chapter Three (vide pp. 229-230) that one of the most radical undertakings of Lacan's "return to Freud" is his translation of Freudian sexuality into linguistic meaning. What Lacan's translation demonstrates is that Freud's recognition of sexuality as involving more than the act of copulation, can be read as the recognition that meaning involves more than the act of literal signification. The argument that there can be no such thing as "simple sex"[2] is translatable as the argument that there can be no such thing as "simple meaning." Just as "simple sex" is the product of the conflict between a primal urge (the libido) and the social codes which trans-

[1] I place the term "sexual Desire" in quotation marks since it is an ambiguous term whose significance in this context will, I hope, become clearer as this chapter progresses.

[2] See Felman's commentary on Freud's discussion of this issue – "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," pp. 108-110.

late that urge into "simple" permissible possibilities and the repressed excess of forbidden "complications", so the notion of "simple meaning" is the product of the conflict between the urge to mean (in French, vouloir dire) and the laws of language by which that urge is expressed and simple meaning produced, by the repression of difference. This relationship between sexuality and meaning is particularly clearly investigated by Shoshana Felman in her Freudian reading of another Henry James text, The Turn of the Screw. Felman argues,

> If, far from implying the simplicity of a self-present literal meaning, sexuality points rather to a multiplicity of conflicting forces, to the complexity of its own divisiveness and contradiction, its meaning can by no means be univocal or unified, but must necessarily be ambiguous. It is thus not rhetoric which disguises and hides sex; sexuality is rhetoric, since it essentially consists of ambiguity: it is the coexistence of dynamically antagonistic meanings. Sexuality is the division and divisiveness of meaning; it is meaning as division, meaning as conflict.[3]

If the Lacanian reader is aware of this identity between sexuality and rhetoric — an identity which I have already explored to some extent in my reading of Nabokov's Lolita in Chapter Three — is it possible for him to identify in the text of What Maisie Knew strategies which authorize a reading of Maisie's quest in the light of this identity? I wish to argue that one of the clearest suggestions of this authorization is apparent in the structuring of the narrative discourse. However, before I become involved

[3] Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," p. 112.

in this discussion let me outline the other issues which I want to raise in this chapter.

In her reading of The Turn of the Screw, Shoshana Felman argues that narration is a participation in, or a performance of, a conflict in meaning which is experienced by the reader as an "effect to produce." This was the argument that I followed in my reading of Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! However, while I restricted my argument to a discussion of the interpretive activity that took place within the framework of the text, and only mentioned peripherally the implication of the reader as a participant who is drawn into the text's framework, Felman undertakes to explore in detail the possibility that a critical interpretation of a text, and at an even further remove, the critical debate about such interpretations, is in fact also a performance or repetition of the conflict dramatized in the text. She argues,

> The scene of the critical debate is thus a repetition of the scene dramatized in the text. The critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly participates in it. Through its very reading, the text, so to speak, acts itself out. As a reading effect, this inadvertent "acting out" is indeed uncanny: whichever way the reader turns, he can but be turned by the text, he can but perform it by repeating it.[4]

By comparing the reading activity to the psychoanalytic situation, Felman identifies strategies in the text of The Turn of the Screw whereby the story-teller – implicitly

[4] Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," p. 101.

compared to the analysand in a psychoanalytic situation — "transfers" on the reader making him the addressee of his unconscious, investing him with the authority and prestige of the sujet-supposé-savoir;[5] the reader in a counter-transference invests the story-teller with like authority. Such "transference" or projection of knowledge is effectively a structure of repetition which in analysis links the psychoanalyst and the discourse he analyses, or which in reading links the reader and the text he reads. In psychoanalysis the 'truth' of the unconscious, becomes manifest as the analyst finds himself repeating through the transference and the counter-transference the dominant structures of the analysand's unconscious. Similarly, according to Felman's view, the most significant structures of a literary text emerge in the reader's transferential repetitions of and participation in, the seminal conflicts of the textual discourse. Jonathan Culler, reviewing, in his work On Deconstruction, recent critical perspectives, offers the following summary of the insights which Felman achieves, at the same time usefully establishing the place which Felman's own text occupies in relation to the literary text she interprets, and the other critical interpretations of that text. He writes,

[5] For explanations of the terms "transference," "counter-transference" and sujet-supposé-savoir in Lacanian psychoanalysis, see pages 56-63 of the Introduction.

> If transference is a structure of repetition linking analyst and the analyzed discourse — the patient's or the text's — we have something comparable in the situation Felman describes: the interpreter replays a pattern in the text; reading is displaced repetition of the structure it seeks to analyse. In that case, the prior readings an interpreter confronts are not errors to be discarded, nor partial truths to be complemented by contrary truths, but revealing repetitions of textual structures. The value of these readings emerges when a later critic — here Felman — transferentially anticipating a transferential relation between critic and text, reads The Turn of the Screw as anticipating and dramatizing the quarrels and interpretive moves of earlier critics.[6]

Now, following Felman's example, I propose in this chapter to take the kind of reading which I offered of Absalom, Absalom! a step further, by considering the prior readings of What Maisie Knew as performances of the conflict dramatized in the text. Because this is only one of various tasks of the chapter, I shall, of course, be forced to restrict the number of illustrations that I can offer of such readings. However, let me remind my reader from the outset, that my own reading of What Maisie Knew which constitutes this chapter, stands, like any other, as a "reading effect" — the effect of my own experience of conflict in the text and my subsequent Desire to resolve that conflict by "rewriting" Henry James's discourse.

Finally, my chief concern in this chapter will be to attempt to anticipate transferentially, a transferential relation between critic and text, hoping thereby to identify in the course of my reading, repeated structures of textual

[6] Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction (London & Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) p. 271.

conflict and thus the "truth" of the textual unconscious. In other words, this will involve an attempt to go beyond the exploration undertaken in Chapter One – an attempt to reveal, not what may be known, but consciously repressed from the textual discourse, but rather what is implicit in the discourse as the unrecognized, marginal or unconscious knowledge of the authorial consciousness.

In summary then, the quest of the chapter is threefold: to explore the identity between sexuality and linguistic meaning in What Maisie Knew, to explore prior readings as performances of the textual conflict, but most importantly, to attempt to unveil the "unconscious knowledge" implicit in the text. To explain the course of this threefold project more clearly, let me return again to the question of the narrative discourse and how it is structured in What Maisie Knew.

The Reader in the Place of the Other: The Narrative Structure of What Maisie Knew

It has frequently been observed that in his later novels, Henry James uses a technique of internal perspective describable as the point-of-view of a "central intelligence" or "central consciousness". This technique has been lucidly described by Roger Fowler as follows:

> ... the novels are constructed so that the whole of their represented world is filtered through the vision of one central character, who thus becomes both subject and viewpoint simultaneously. ... A third person narrator deliberately restricts what he tells us to what the character has experienced, and relates the experiences

> in a style which displays the quality of the character's engagement with the world.[7]

What Maisie Knew is an example of this use of "central intelligence". The subject matter of this text does however, present a particular problem for this technique, for while a child's perceptions and feelings at the age of six – the age at which Maisie is introduced to the reader – may be both profoundly complex and sensitive, her/his linguistic skills at this age must inevitably prevent the articulation of these feelings and perceptions to any degree of sophistication. The convention is therefore established in this text, that the narrator will act as the translator of Maisie's perceptions. The reader is invited to expect and accept a discourse restricted to Maisie's viewpoint, but manifesting the linguistic control of a well-spoken, articulate narrator. The place constructed for the reader within the text is that of a spectator who has at his side a translator, the narrator. The two adults look over the shoulder of Maisie, the "mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre"[8] and observe with her the "images bounding across the wall in the slide of a magic lantern" (WMK p. 15). These three observers appear to "read" the text of Maisie's world simultaneously and if Maisie's inter-

[7] Roger Fowler, Linguistics and the Novel (London: Methuen & Co., 1977), p. 109.

[8] Henry James, What Maisie Knew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966 rpt 1980) p. 15. Subsequent references to this work will be included in the body of the chapter, using the abbreviation "WMK" followed by the relevant page number.

pretations of this text are not immediately accessible to the reader, they are relayed to him by the mediating presence of the narrator.

In this configuration, the reader and the narrator, presumably both adults, occupy a different subjective position to Maisie in relation to the events they observe, so that their interpretations of those events are equally liable to be different from hers. Meanings which are inaccessible to a child such as Maisie may be readily accessible to the adult interpreters. Limitations in Maisie's knowledge manifest themselves as gaps or flaws – otherwise recognizable as ironic implications – which open in the discourse inviting the interruption or intrusion of the adults. Since the role of the narrator is specifically one of translation rather than elaboration of Maisie's perceptions, he very rarely interrupts the discourse with his own interpretations. Instead, it is the role of the <u>reader</u> to elaborate on Maisie's interpretation, to articulate that "meaning" which has been excluded from her knowledge as unrecognized.

Any reader's view of what is not recognized in Maisie's knowledge will obviously be determined by his particular critical perspective. (In Lacanian terms, the reader's view of the "Other" will depend on the nature of the codes and conventions governing the Symbolic Order to which he belongs, the subjective position he adopts within that Symbolic Order, and hence the meanings which he will choose

to authorize). Since every new reader carries with him the potential to belong to a different social context or critical school (Symbolic Order) and to adopt a particular stand within that context, and since the text of Maisie's knowledge itself contains many ambiguities which the narrator only very rarely assists the reader in resolving, it is not surprising that the numerous readings of that knowledge reflect the "difference" at play in the loci of both reader and text. It is worth considering briefly some of the more marked differences of meaning which arise in these readings.

Many critics regard Maisie's knowledge as "corrupt". Amongst these is firstly, Oscar Cargill who concludes that the little girl is the "refuse-catching vortex about whom a current of dissolute life pulses and whirls."[9] Like Cargill, Harris W. Wilson regards Maisie as corrupted by her knowledge. He chooses to recognize this knowledge as 'literal sexual information' and her 'corruption' as the willingness to take advantage of this knowledge:

> What Maisie saw was Sir Claude's sexual promiscuity, 'his weakness', and the secret she discovered in Bologne [sic] was that to win him for herself and Mrs. Wix, she must do battle with her stepmother in terms of that weakness. Her greatest asset opposed to Mrs. Beale's lush worldliness is her virginity, and that she is prepared to offer.[10]

Taking a quite different stand, Walter Isle interprets

[9] Oscar Cargill, The Novels of Henry James (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 258.

[10] Harris W. Wilson, "What Did Maisie Know?" College English, 17 (Feb. 1956) p. 281.

Maisie's ultimate knowledge as pure, incorrupt. He concludes that, "All the patterns then are complete. Education has resulted in knowledge, the withdrawal to France has given new life, the temptations have been overcome, and Maisie returns uncorrupted."[11] Kenny Marotta, who also views Maisie as "innocent", qualifies the nature of this innocence as "redemptive":

> One of the first novels in his late style, Henry James's What Maisie Knew (1897) shows how that style grew out of his characteristic theme: the redemptive power of innocence. Like Christopher Newman or Isabel Archer, Maisie Farange preserves her integrity and her capacity for love against the attacks and temptations of a corrupt society.[12]

In contrast with these views, Maxwell Geismar dismisses the project of What Maisie Knew:

> ... the whole concept of an immaculate infantine 'innocence' shining forth in the midst of all this adult 'corruption' — and even redeeming it — was sentimental and implausible; and also highly questionable. In the story itself Maisie is another one of the improbable Jamesian infants who in fact serves mainly as a 'voyeur-glass' so to speak, for the obliquely reflected sexual antics of her elders.[13]

I hope to demonstrate later in the text some of the over-simplifications which appear to lead Geismar to such conclusions. For the present, I suspend discussion of other

[11] Walter Isle, Experiments in Form: Henry James's Novels, 1896-1901 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968) p. 164.

[12] Kenny Marotta, "What Maisie Knew: The Question of Our Speech," English Literary History, 46 (1979) p. 495.

[13] Maxwell Geismar, Henry James and the Jacobites (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963) p. 150.

critical disagreements, such as the famous Scrutiny debate of Marius Bewley and F.R. Leavis, and from the examples above, draw the following conclusion: each critic, in the very process of supplying the "lack" which he detects in Maisie's knowledge thereby produces a new discourse which itself manifests gaps or lacks evident to an alternative reader, the Other of the reader himself. For example, Harris Wilson's interpretation of Maisie's knowledge is described by a later critic, Carren Osna Kaston, as having "a literalness that James did not intend." Kaston then proceeds in her turn to supply the "meaning" which she feels that Wilson has unwittingly repressed:

> The complication which interests James, however, is not exactly whether Maisie will go to bed with Sir Claude, but whether her sexual feelings will be so engaged by him that she will be unable to extend them to men who do not stand in a paternal relation to her.[14]

If the reading activity is viewed in this light, can the reading of What Maisie Knew which this chapter offers claim to be any more than another effort to participate in the game of infinite irony which reading appears to be? Can this reading be anything more than another attempt to respond to the "absences" in the text which coerce the reader to produce the "unconscious" discourse whereby Maisie's "conscious" discourse may gain its meaning? Perhaps one privilege that this reader can claim is the freedom to agree consciously to take the role of resigned dupe to

[14] Carren Osna Kaston, "Houses of Fiction in What Maisie Knew," Criticism 18 (1976), p. 35.

the ironic play of meaning instead of finding himself its unwitting pawn. However, it would seem that there is more that a reading of this nature can attempt, and it is in this respect that Shoshana Felman's insights into the "transferential relation" of text and reader can be of particular use.

If we reconsider the role demanded of the reader by the text of What Maisie Knew it is possible to anticipate that a shuttling pattern will develop in the reading activity as the reader, interrupting the discourse of the text, produces the meaning absent from Maisie's perceptions, and then once again resumes his progress through the text. This shuttling pattern between text and reader is comparable to the shuttling between the analysand's discourse and the analyst which Felman identifies as the "transferential relation".[15] Yet, 'what Maisie knows' and that which she does not know but which the reader is required to produce, are the conceptions and products of an authorial consciousness, so the "transferences" which take place between Maisie's discourse and the reader's are "represented" or "dramatized" transferences, also consciously devised by the implied author. What is more intriguing is the possibility of a second, unconscious transferential relation which this first one paradigmatically suggests, and which Felman's observations encourage us to anticipate.

Just as there was observed to be a difference between

[15] Felman, p. 135.

the subjective positions of the reader and narrator as adults on one hand, and Maisie, the child, on the other, so there is also liable to be a difference between the interpretive position of the reader and that of the narrator. For example, the narrator, whose identity in this text is indistinguishable from that of the authorial consciousness, translating perceptions in the context of late-nineteenth century London must attempt to articulate concepts which are only years later to become recognized and accounted for through the work of theorists such as Freud and Lacan. Thus, if the narrator appears in his conscious discourse to treat "sexuality" as "literal sexual information" that is lacking from Maisie's knowledge, it may be possible for the reader — who, years later is familiar with Freudian and Lacanian thought, and therefore occupies the locus of the Other — to identify in such "sexuality" a paradigm for "excess meaning" or Otherness that is repressed from any conscious linguistic discourse. Furthermore, this second configuration between the authorial consciousness and the reader implies the possibility of a second, a 'real' transferential relation in which the unconscious transferences and countertransferences are the product of the gaps or absences in the knowledge of the authorial consciousness itself, when, unable to offer a rational account of Maisie's knowledge from the perspective which he holds, the authorial consciousness, or narrator, transfers unconsciously to the implied reader. It is to these

transferences then, that particular attention will be drawn. An attempt will be made to identify the precise moment of transference, the consequent commencement of the reader's response to that transference, as well as the point at which the reader countertransfers to the narrator once again.

While it may not be possible to identify every narratorial transference, the aim of this reading must be to identify sufficient transferences to establish a pattern of repetition indicating that which is consistently absent from the authorial consciousness and which can therefore be regarded as the unconscious, the present absence of the text of What Maisie Knew.

* * * * *

The Prologue

Before assuming his role as mediator of Maisie's perceptions, the narrator outlines for the reader the circumstances from which the events to be narrated arise and the context in which Maisie's quest for knowledge is to take place. Assuming no restriction on the range of his perspective, the narrator changes point-of-view rapidly from that of the uninvolved spectator to that of Beale Farange, of Ida Farange, of Maisie and finally of the London social set to which the Faranges belong. With each change of perspective, ironic implications are brought

into play so that beyond the apparently civilized rationale of each point-of-view the reader may be conscious of suppressed countermeanings which threaten to erupt in contradiction. The reader is thus initiated into the play of difference, the subversiveness of the Other which Maisie experiences as she finds herself tossed and hurled from player to player, from parent to step-parent, to governess to lover, in the incessant "game" of "sexuality" or "excess meaning".

To illustrate this, I shall consider briefly, the opening description of the divorce suit of Beale and Ida Farange. At first this scene suggests the respect due to legal procedure and the gravity of divorce as annulment of a legal contract. Using terminology such as "litigation," "decision on the appeal" and "assignment of the child," the narrator appears to assume a narrative distance sustained in his references to "the father," "the mother" and "the child." However, if restraint and discretion are principles which might be expected to dominate within courts of law, there is a suggestion of Otherness or difference at play in these court proceedings. By introducing into the ostensibly grave discourse metaphors not only of mud-slinging — "the father" was "bespattered from head to foot" (WMK p. 11) — but of armed battle — Beale Farange was "compelled ... perceptibly to lower his crest" — the narrator implies the presence of a viciousness and fury alarmingly incongruous with the highly coded realm

of legal procedure. When it is revealed moreover that Beale Farange is unable to account for twenty-six hundred pounds, when it is implied that this money — supplied by Ida on condition that Beale "would take no proceedings" — is effectively a bribe coercing Beale to ignore his wife's extra-marital affairs, when Beale's public embarrassment over this monetary issue is quite evidently Ida's public victory, then the proper, discreet and restrained legal proceedings are transformed into a riotous orgy of spite. The courts, however, seem both impotent to control the squabbling adults, and incapable of protecting the interests of the six-year-old child embroiled in the fray. Since nobody can be found in the Farange's fashionable London set to act in loco parentis for Maisie, she is "abandoned to her fate" (WMK p. 13). She becomes a useful instrument in the battle which her parents wage against each other,

> ... a ready vessel for bitterness, a deep little porcelain cup in which biting acids could be mixed. They had wanted her not for any good they could do her, but for the harm they could, with her unconscious aid, do each other (WMK p. 13).

EDUCATION BY OPPOSED PRINCIPLES: Maisie learns to "read" and "write"

Having established the context and circumstances from which Maisie's quest-to-know embarks, the narrator reduces the focus of the discourse to the perspective of the six-year-old child, introducing her from the outset as a quester after the "meaning" of her world, "a young intelligence

intensely aware that something had happened which must matter a good deal and looking anxiously out for the effects of so great a cause" (WMK p. 15). The first four chapters of the text describe Maisie's initially regular oscillations between the polarised homes of her parents. The first invaluable lesson she learns from this education by "opposed principles" (WMK p. 13) is to recognize the ambiguity which the opposition of her parents produces in the "meaning" of her world. This recognition enables her to graduate from the status of passive malleable instrument, the "little feathered shuttlecock" (WMK p. 19) who plays a central, if unwitting role in her parents' game of spite, to the place of an independent "reader" of her experiences.

Initially, while she is perceptive and observant, Maisie is often unable to fit her perceptions into any significant pattern. She is forced to wait until her powers of interpretation have developed sufficiently for her to be able to read the "texts" she encounters. If to the reader, observing her in this position, she is poignantly vulnerable, she is soon to discover her own means of self-defence.

At the close of Chapter One, when she is on the point of being transferred from her father's home to her mother's, Maisie experiences the following incident. She remembers it vividly as,

> ... a strange outbreak in the drawing-room on the part of Moddle, who, in reply to something her father had just said, cried aloud: "You ought to be perfectly ashamed of yourself — you ought to blush, sir, for the way

> you go on!" The carriage, with her mother in it, was at the door; a gentleman who was there, who was always there, laughed out very loud; her father, who had her in his arms, said to Moddle: "My dear woman, I'll settle you presently!" – after which he repeated, showing his teeth more than ever at Maisie while he hugged her, the words for which her nurse had taken him up. Maisie was not at the moment so fully conscious of them as of the wonder of Moddle's sudden disrespect and crimson face; but she was able to produce them in the course of five minutes when, in the carriage, her mother, all kisses, ribbons, eyes, arms, strange sounds and sweet smells, said to her: "And did your beastly papa, my precious angel, send any message to your own loving mamma?" Then it was that she found the words spoken by her beastly papa to be, after all, in her little bewildered ears, from which, at her mother's appeal, they passed, in her clear shrill voice, straight to her little innocent lips. "He said I was to tell you, from him," she faithfully reported, "that you're a nasty horrid pig!" (WMK p. 18).

While to Maisie, Moddle's outburst may appear "strange", to the reader this rupture of domestic order is some indication of the degree of shabbiness to which Beale Farange stoops on this occasion. His indiscretions and irresponsibility provoke overt disgust even in his unsophisticated employees. To Maisie, the contradictory effect of humour and disgust which her father's words generate is confusing. To the reader, however, it may be evident that these contradictory effects arise from the ambiguity inherent in the role which she is being required to play. The humour shared by Beale Farange and his male companion stems from their awareness that Maisie will perform her role of messenger and ironically of insulter with all the enthusiasm of a child's eagerness to please. Moddle's disgust on the other hand stems from her awareness that while Maisie may delight her father by the faithful delivery of his message, she

is likely to incur the wrath of her mother for performing, with dutiful naïvety, the task her father has given her. It is precisely this experience of her mother's wrath that provokes Maisie to new understanding.

After the incident recounted above, it becomes increasingly evident to her parents that Maisie is failing to retain the messages they give her to deliver to each other. Initially they are unsure whether to conclude that she is "extremely cunning" or "extremely stupid". At length they adopt the latter opinion, although the reader is given the following more privileged perspective of Maisie's development:

> The theory of her stupidity, eventually embraced by her parents, corresponded with a great date in her small still life: the complete vision, private but final, of the strange office she filled. It was literally a moral revolution and accomplished in the depths of her nature. The stiff dolls on the dusky shelves began to move their arms and legs; old forms and phrases began to have a sense that frightened her. She had a new feeling, the feeling of danger; on which a new remedy rose to meet it, the idea of an inner self or, in other words, of concealment. She puzzled out with imperfect signs, but with a prodigious spirit, that she had been a centre of hatred and a messenger of insult, and that everything was bad because she had been employed to make it so. Her parted lips locked themselves with the determination to be employed no longer. She would forget everything, she would repeat nothing, and when, as a tribute to the successful application of her system, she began to be called a little idiot, she tasted a pleasure new and keen. When therefore, as she grew older, her parents in turn announced before her that she had grown shockingly dull, it was not from any real contraction of her little stream of life. She spoiled their fun, but she practically added to her own. She saw more and more; she saw too much (WMK pp. 19-20).

What Maisie seems to recognize on this occasion is that

the "dolls" she has been carrying and playing with, are not toys, but "real" and "living" — she has been participating not in a game, but in a "real" and vicious battle. She recognizes moreover that the role she has been playing in this battle, the role of parental messenger, has involved the inevitable counter-role of parental insulter. Thus she intuits the outcome of her education according to two "opposed principles": the effect of ambiguity. That which is commendable according to the paternal principle will by definition be condemnable according to the maternal principle. In response to this discovery Maisie resolves to withdraw from the role she has been ascribed. To do this, she constructs for herself a public or substitute self, the "little idiot" who stands in the place of the messenger, yet cannot be of effective use since she is incapable of remembering or conveying any message successfully. This construct enables the "real" Maisie to withdraw to a concealed, safe position from which she can observe and attempt to understand the parental game. In effect then, Maisie could be said to make her first assertion of freedom as an author who may adopt subjective positions she chooses from which to exercise her ability to make meaning. At the same time she takes her first step towards becoming a productive and independent reader in that she is no longer an unwitting mouthpiece for the interpretations of others, but can produce or withhold her own reading of texts.

Knowledge and the Governess

Miss Overmore As Maisie grows older, her education according to opposed principles continues at the hands of her governesses, the first of whom is Miss Overmore. The latter, the eldest daughter of an impecunious family of eight girls, is to Maisie extraordinarily pretty and accomplished, particularly in comparison to Moddle, her former nurse. She can "say lots of dates straight off (letting you hold the book yourself) state the position of Malabar, play six pieces without notes and, in a sketch, put in beautifully the trees and houses and difficult parts" (WMK p. 28). Maisie's admiration for Miss Overmore is described as "her first passion" (WMK p. 25), and she concludes that her affection is reciprocated, "There was no doubt that she was dear to this beautiful friend" (WMK p. 23-24). This "unquestionable fact" is established by the following circumstances. On the conclusion of her sojourn with her mother and the commencement of a new term with her father, Maisie is told that she must relinquish Miss Overmore since Mrs. Farange has decreed that "Beale's was a house in which no decent woman could consent to be seen" (WMK p. 23). In Miss Overmore's words to Maisie, "She [Ida] says that if I ever do such a thing as enter his service I must never expect to show my face in this house again" (WMK p. 23). At this point such a veto, unexplained, is a mystery to Maisie although to the reader its sexual implications will be obvious: Ida wishes to deprive her former husband of

the availability of a pretty, unattached young woman. Shortly after Maisie's establishment at her father's home, circumstances change:

> There was indeed no doubt that she was dear to this beautiful friend. What could have proved it better than the fact that before a week was out, in spite of their distressing separation and her mother's prohibition and Miss Overmore's scruples and Miss Overmore's promise, the beautiful friend had turned up at her father's? (WMK pp. 23-24).

An explanation of this change is soon forthcoming from Miss Overmore herself:

> The bright creature told her little charge frankly what had happened — that she had really been unable to hold out. She had broken her vow to Mrs. Farange; she had struggled for three days and then had come straight to Maisie's papa and told him the simple truth. She adored his daughter; she could n't give her up; she'd make for her any sacrifice. On this basis it had been arranged that she should stay; her courage had been rewarded; she left Maisie in no doubt as to the amount of courage she had required. Some of the things she said made a particular impression on the child — her declaration for instance that when her pupil should get older she'd understand better just how "dreadfully bold" a young lady, to do exactly what she had done, had to be (WMK p. 24).

Miss Overmore's explanation, presented with the narrative immediacy of free indirect speech, is dense with modifiers which suggest the speaker's effort to eliminate any possibility of ambiguity from her speech, for example, she "told her little charge frankly what had happened"; "she had really been unable to hold out"; she "had come straight to Maisie's papa and told him the simple truth". While in the apparent lucidity of this explanation Maisie may

read the "simple truth" that she is adored by her governess, the reader on the other hand may detect Miss Overmore's awareness of alternative meaning which she chooses to repress firmly. It becomes particularly clear that a measure of information is being withheld from Maisie when Miss Overmore declares that she will need to be older to appreciate her governess's daring. If the knowledge necessary for such appreciation is absent from the consciousness of Maisie as sexually innocent child, it may be evident in the locus of the "Other"[16] – the sexually knowledgeable reader: Miss Overmore's action requires daring because it exposes her to the accusation that as a young, single, impoverished but pretty woman she is seeking to make herself available to the attractive, apparently affluent and unattached father of the child she tutors. The fact that Beale Farange has, a short while previously, demonstrated his interest in Miss Overmore, and the latter, if bereft of Maisie will be denied any opportunities in the immediate future of cultivating that interest, may lead the reader to suspect that being available to Beale Farange is likely to be what Miss Overmore wishes to accomplish. Viewed in this light, Miss Overmore's "bold" behaviour seems less likely to mean "simply" that she is devoted to Maisie. It involves the additional possibilities, for example, that she is fond of both Maisie and her father; or that

[16] It seems necessary to establish a distinction here between the reader who acts as Maisie's "Other" at a "meta"- level and the reader who acts as actual Other to the authorial consciousness. To maintain this distinction the former will be written in inverted commas as above.

she is fond of Maisie and moreover sees in her a means of becoming better acquainted with her father; or that she is fond of Maisie because she provides a pretext for becoming better acquainted with her father; or perhaps that she cares little for Maisie but uses the child as a useful pretext for making herself available to the father. It is because Maisie's interpretation of Miss Overmore excludes such nuances of meaning that it is so clearly defined as "innocent" or "naïve". If to Maisie Miss Overmore is the source of "simple truth", to the reader she is likely to be simply the conscious represser of ambiguity.

Mrs. Wix While Miss Overmore seems to Maisie to eliminate ambiguity through her cleverness, her second governess, Mrs. Wix, seems surprisingly unaware that the possibility of ambiguity might even exist. Maisie's first encounter with the old woman follows her term with Miss Overmore and her father, when, collected by her surly mother, she is brusquely delivered into Mrs. Wix's care. If initially, with her "straighteners," her antiquated coiffure and her "ugly snuff-coloured dress," Mrs. Wix "struck" Maisie as "terrible" (WMK pp. 25-26), this effect is modified as the old woman comes to "touch" her "in a spot that had never even yet been reached." This change is apparently the product of Mrs. Wix's account of the loss of her own child. What this loss suggests to Maisie is that there is a place for a child in Mrs. Wix's world where there has been no place in Ida Farange's, and only an artificial

place – the place of pupil – in Miss Overmore's.[17] Without her child Mrs. Wix regards herself as "broken-hearted", as ceasing to exist. Her very definition as "mother" depends on the presence of her child. Thus if Ida Farange's neglect has left the locus of Mother vacant in Maisie's world and available to Mrs. Wix, Clara Matilda's death has left the locus of Child vacant in Mrs. Wix's world and available to Maisie.

Increased contact with Mrs. Wix enables Maisie to identify in her an unexpected "charm" which is apparently beyond the perception of her more scornful critics:

> At first she had looked cross and almost cruel; but this impression passed away with the child's increased perception of her being in the eyes of the world a figure mainly to laugh at. She was as droll as a charade or an animal toward the end of the "natural history" – a person whom people, to make talk lively, described to each other and imitated.
>
> ... She [Maisie] knew governesses were poor; Miss Overmore was unmentionably and Mrs. Wix ever so publicly so. Neither this, however, nor the old brown frock nor the diadem nor the button, made a difference for Maisie in the charm put forth through everything, the charm of Mrs. Wix's conveying that somehow, in her ugliness and her poverty, she was peculiarly and soothingly safe; safer than any one in the world, than papa, than mamma, that the lady with the arched eyebrows; safer even, though so much less beautiful,

[17] Ida Farange's lack of interest in Maisie can be interpreted in the light of Tony Tanner's interesting comments on this subject in his book Adultery in the Novel. He points out that in novels of adultery,

"... although there invariably are children, or at least a child, often there is curiously little interest in them or it, even on the part of the mother (or especially on the part of the mother). ... The negative or reverse aspect of an inclination to adultery would seem to be a disinclination to maternity, and it might be a mistake to try and find an order of priority for these feelings or to attempt to relate them in a cause-and-effect sequence. It is all part of the decomposition of that unstable, supposedly unitary trinity – the wife-mother-lover." – Adultery in the Novel (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, pbk. rpt. 1981) p. 98.

> than Miss Overmore, on whose loveliness, as she supposed it, the little girl was faintly conscious that one could n't rest with quite the same tucked-in and kissed-for-good-night feeling. Mrs. Wix was as safe as Clara Matilda, who was in heaven and yet, embarrassingly, also in Kensal Green, where they had been together to see her little huddled grave. It was from something in Mrs. Wix's tone, which in spite of caricature remained indescribable and inimitable, that Maisie, before her term with her mother was over, drew this sense of a support, like a breast-high banister in a place of "drops," that would never give way (WMK pp. 27-28).

From the reader's position of "Otherness," it may be apparent that this charm of the new governess which seems to evade definition consists in that which has been denied or repressed from Maisie's experience up to this point. In a social set such as the Faranges', transgression, capriciousness and flux are the norm, taking the form of impermanent sexual alliances, constantly changing fashions and so forth. Although to such a set, Mrs. Wix, with her antiquated appearance and strong moral opinions is comically bizarre, to Maisie the old woman has the charm of stability and order — the "safety" — which the little girl has been previously denied.

While Miss Overmore, conscious of the subversive effect that ambiguity may produce on "simple truth" is careful to repress the divisiveness of meaning, Mrs. Wix, by virtue of the "straightness" of her vision, seems unable to notice ambiguity which even to Maisie is embarrassingly obvious. Confident of her own judgement, Mrs. Wix does not flinch from thorny problems such as, what happens to loved ones who die? To her the answer is clear: They go to heaven,

and if later a contradictory answer manifests itself such as, They are buried in places such as Kensal Green, Mrs. Wix, for whom the body/soul dichotomy of the Christian faith is no doubt unquestionably acceptable, seems happily unaware of the contradiction. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that so unshakeable an interpretive stand should make a little girl, searching for "the truth" in a treacherously unpredictable world, feel "safe", as might a "breast-high banister in a place of 'drops,' that would never give way."[18]

[18] Maisie's experience of Mrs. Wix as "safe" yet also, on occasion oppressive, the grave defender of her "moral sense" (the Symbolic Order), yet the comically incongruous caricature (the "Other") within the Faranges' social set, clearly illustrates the ambiguity which she perceives in the world. It is this ambiguity which is liable to produce the correspondingly wide range of readings that we have already witnessed (vide pp. 333 - 335) and that is once again evident in critical discussions of Mrs. Wix. For example, Tony Tanner identifies Mrs. Wix as a restrictive threat to a young quester after knowledge. He writes,

> "She [Mrs. Wix] has no capacity for wonder and ideally would like to close Maisie's eyes for good. Yet Maisie's supreme virtue is her very unprejudiced inquiringness. James describes Maisie as 'only, more than anything else, curious' and so it is not surprising that the presence of Mrs. Wix sometimes depresses her. ... Maisie wants to 'see' the world: Mrs. Wix wants to prevent her seeing and make her 'judge' it. Mrs. Wix's desire to protect is also a desire to possess; and that possessiveness includes an instinct to arrest, to impose a state of sensory imprisonment."

See Tony Tanner, The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) p. 292.

F.R. Leavis, on the other hand, describes Mrs. Wix as an embodiment of decent behaviour:

> "She represents good nature, affectionateness and maternal feeling, these virtues being altogether unrecommended by external advantages. .. The virtues, that Mrs. Wix represents are solid and strongly self-recommendatory and she represents too ... respectability."

See F.R. Leavis, "What Maisie Knew A Disagreement by F.R. Leavis" in Marius Bewley The Complex Fate (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952) p. 128.

**The Dual Nature of Knowledge:
the accessible and the forbidden**

As Maisie's quest proceeds, she becomes aware of a dichotomy in the knowledge which she strives to acquire. She notices, for example, that the text/society she is reading, resists her efforts to interpret it. Her experience of the world is that,

> Everything had something behind it: life was like a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors. She had learned that at these doors it was wise not to knock — this seemed to produce from within such sounds of derision (WMK pp. 32-33).

The simile that compares life to a corridor of closed doors implies that to Maisie, the world is an intimate environment where adult action takes place behind closed doors that exclude her from participation. For her, only the straightness of the corridor is accessible and any attempt to open doors, or to investigate what the closed doors might hide is met with strong disapproval from those "within."

Investigating the very process of acquiring knowledge, Maisie constructs a questing situation in which she visualizes herself in the position of the knowledgeable, the authority, who has the power to open and close doors, and

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Lee Ann Johnson argues that Mrs. Wix emerges as "a significant comic character whose self-interested, misguided attempts to educate her charge serve as a source of humor and irony within the novel." — Johnson, "James's Mrs. Wix: the 'Dim, Crooked Reflector'" Nineteenth Century Fiction, 29 (1974) pp. 164-172, particular reference to pp. 164-165.

she puts her French doll Lisette in the position of quester who knocks at doors:

> Little by little, however, she understood more, for it befell that she was enlightened by Lisette's questions, which reproduced the effect of her own upon those for whom she sat in the very darkness of Lisette. Was she not herself convulsed by such innocence? In the presence of it she often imitated the shrieking ladies. There were at any rate things she really could n't tell even a French doll. She could only pass on her lessons and study to produce on Lisette the impression of having mysteries in her life, wondering the while whether she succeeded in the air of shading off, like her mother, into the unknowable. When the reign of Miss Overmore followed that of Mrs. Wix she took a fresh cue, emulating her governess and bridging over the interval with the simple expectation of trust. Yes, there were matters one could n't "go into" with a pupil. There were for instance days when, after prolonged absence, Lisette, watching her take off her things, tried hard to discover where she had been. Well, she discovered a little, but never discovered all. There was an occasion when, on her, being particularly indiscreet, Maisie replied to her — and precisely about the motive of a disappearance — as she, Maisie, had once been replied to by Mrs. Farange: "Find out for yourself!" She mimicked her mother's sharpness, but she was rather ashamed afterwards, though as to whether of the sharpness or of the mimicry was not quite clear (WMK p. 33).

In this role-playing experiment, Maisie discovers firstly, that she as an "authority", a holder of knowledge, can experience a sense of advantage and power over the ignorant quester. She discovers that she is in control over what the quester may be permitted to know and that which must remain a mystery to him. In Lacanian terms, she can be interpreted as discovering unwittingly, the arbitrary nature of authority and the meaning which it chooses to express or consciously repress.

As yet however, there is no indication that she has

any criteria whereby she could select what she would choose to conceal and what she would permit to be revealed. While she is discovering the locus of the "Other" as the "forbidden", the unknown which lies "behind closed doors," and which it is indiscreet to investigate, she has not yet established what the nature of that "Other" might be.

What is particularly interesting about her discovery from a Lacanian perspective, is that while she detects the nature of knowledge or "the truth" to be "split", she does not appear to detect any similar split in her knowledge of herself. Although she has apparently identified a split in her conscious self between a "public" and a "private" self (vide pp. 343-344) comparable to the "Self-for-Itself" and the "Self-for-Others" proposed by Sartre and by Merleau Ponty[19] there is no implication that she experiences any sense of division between the "self" which she knows consciously and can express, and any "self" that is hidden from her or inaccessible to her. Mysteriousness may arise for example between the "self" of her mother and "the other" (in this case, Maisie), and she may "study" to imitate a similar mysteriousness, "the air of shading off, like her mother, into the unknowable" between her

[19] This point is made by Paul Armstrong who offers a particularly interesting phenomenological reading of What Maisie Knew arguing that such an approach to James's work seems invited by its many affinities to the philosophy of his brother William. In philosophical circles, the latter has won increasing recognition as an early member of the phenomenological tradition. See Paul B. Armstrong, "How Maisie Knows: The Phenomenology of James's Moral Vision," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 20, 4 (Winter 1978) pp. 522-523.

"self" and "the other" as Lisette. However, there is no suggestion that such mysteriousness is ever experienced as a mystery of the Self (as unconscious Other) to the self (as the conscious).

Ambiguity in the role of governess

As time passes, it becomes apparent to Maisie that her parents are no longer as prompt as they had initially been to assert their respective rights to an equal share of her company. One day, while sounding out Miss Overmore as to whether she might be considered to have overstayed her welcome with her father, Maisie discovers that the absence of her mother is the result of an "improper" relationship which she is enjoying abroad at Florence. She learns from her governess that, while her father's relationship with Miss Overmore is to be judged "perfectly proper," her mother's relationship with her new companion, who is later identified as "Sir Claude", does not share this approved status. The factor determining this difference in the nature of the two relationships appears to be Maisie herself. Miss Overmore has frequently declared to Maisie, "I don't know what in the world, darling, your father and I should do without you, for you just make the difference, as I've told you, of keeping us perfectly proper" (WMK p. 37). While Maisie is aware that Miss Overmore's role as governess is split between "duties" to her pupil and "duties" to her pupil's father, Maisie does not realize that one of these roles, like her mother's present rela-

tionship with her new companion, falls into the category of "the forbidden" or "improper". It therefore occurs to her that she might extend the usefulness of her own position by being pupil to her mother's companion just as she is pupil to her father's:

> ... she had heard somehow of little girls — of exalted rank, it was true — whose education was carried on by instructors of the other sex, and she knew that if she were at school at Brighton it would be thought an advantage to her to be more or less in the hands of masters. She turned these things over and remarked to Miss Overmore that if she should go to her mother perhaps the gentleman might become her tutor.
> "The gentleman?" The proposition was complicated enough to make Miss Overmore stare.
> "The one who's with mamma. Might n't that make it right — as right as your being my governess makes it for you to be with papa?" (WMK p. 37).

Once again, in Lacanian terms Maisie's suggestion manifests the unwitting recognition of the arbitrariness of a subjective position: a "lover" might be also a "tutor" as easily as a "governess" might be also a "lover". As Miss Overmore's reaction suggests, Maisie has innocently exposed the transgressive ambiguity or "Otherness" in her role as governess. In order to recuperate the former propriety of her position, Miss Overmore attempts to assert the primacy of her role as "mentor of the child," over that of "lover of the father":

> Miss Overmore considered; she coloured a little; then she embraced her ingenious friend. "You're too sweet! I'm a real governess."
> "And could n't he be a real tutor?"
> "Of course not. He's ignorant and bad."
> "Bad —?" Maisie echoed with wonder.
> Her companion gave a queer little laugh at her tone. "He's ever so much younger —" But that was all.

> "Younger than you?"
> Miss Overmore laughed again; it was the first time Maisie had seen her approach so nearly to a giggle. "Younger than — no matter whom. ..." (WMK pp. 37-38).

Each step of this argument opens an ironic gap in which the reader can detect counter-meanings at play, for example, Miss Overmore declares that Sir Claude could not be a "real" tutor as she is a "real" governess because he is "ignorant and bad". The implication of this argument is that "real" governesses and tutors are well-educated and good. Although Maisie does not query the first of these attributes, the reader may well smile at the irony of Miss Overmore's "qualifications." Being able to "say lots of dates straight off" and "in a sketch, put in beautifully the trees and houses and difficult parts" (WMK p. 28) hardly presents an overwhelming challenge to Sir Claude's subsequently revealed accomplishments, such as his competent French-speaking and his knowledge of music (WMK p. 239, p. 254; p. 104).

Maisie does inquire into Sir Claude's "badness", but Miss Overmore, on the verge of explaining that Sir Claude is bad because he is younger than Maisie's mother, abandons her argument, no doubt recognizing that since she is considerably younger than Maisie's father (WMK p. 66), she must according to her own logic be "bad" too. Having effectively proved that the difference or impropriety she wishes to see in Sir Claude's relationship with Ida is actually similarity to her relationship with Beale Farange, Miss Overmore represses the entire argument in an unchal-

lengeable statement of personal taste: "He's not my sort, and I'm sure, my own darling, he's not yours" (WMK p. 38). Maisie has no alternative, but to trust to the apparent firmness of such authority: "Parents had come to seem vague, but governesses were evidently to be trusted" (WMK p. 38).

Thus, while Maisie initially assumes that the position of the governess is one of absolute authority, she comes to discover that the interpretations of her two governesses are confusingly inconsistent with each other. When, for example, Mrs. Wix, as Ida Farange's messenger arrives at Beale Farange's home with the news that Ida is to marry Sir Claude, the picture she presents of this young man is very different to Miss Overmore's description. He is transformed from "ignorant" and "bad" to "a dear friend of Mrs. Farange's, who had been of great assistance to her in getting to Florence and in making herself comfortable there for the winter" (WMK p. 42). It is only some time later, when Miss Overmore, having married Beale Farange, has begun to weary of her lot as "Mrs Beale", that Maisie is given the opportunity to form her own opinion of Sir Claude.

Interpreting the Role of Sir Claude: the Stepfather, the Romantic Hero, the Phallus

Presented with Mrs. Wix's photograph of Sir Claude, Maisie had been greatly impressed by "the fair smooth face, the regular features, the kind eyes, the amiable air, the

general glossiness and smartness of her prospective step-father" (WMK p. 43). When he subsequently appears to her in person, in the drawing-room of her absent father's home, her initial impressions are endorsed: he is "by far the most shining presence that had ever made her gape" (WMK p. 49). It is not surprising that Maisie, who is no longer required as a pretext for the affair between her father and her governess; who has already long over-stayed the prescribed limits of her current term with her father; who has been left chiefly to the mercy of Susan Ash the under-housemaid; should look upon Sir Claude as a 'knight-in-shining-armour', a saviour who will deliver her from her "fallen state" (WMK p. 49). She identifies him as fitting Mrs. Wix's descriptions of romantic heroes, "the lovers of her distressed beauties — 'the perfect gentleman and strikingly handsome...'" (WMK p. 52), so that from the start he seems to take for her the role of "object of Desire," the Phallus.[20]

Addressing her directly, Sir Claude explains his relation to her through his marriage to her mother. If he is her step-father, to the Lacanian reader he may also be interpreted as her Symbolic Father bearing the implicit

[20] At this point I emphasize once again the distinction to be made in Lacanian theory between "the phallus" as male sexual organ, and "the Phallus," the "signifier of signifiers." The Phallus, by its presence appears to hold the promise of fulfilment of the primal lack but paradoxically is also signifier of the lack or absence inherent in linguistic representation. For more detailed explication of this distinction, please see pages 32-36 of my Introduction.

promise of Law and the very Symbolic Order which Maisie had lacked in order to make consistent meaning of the ambiguities which she confronts in the "text" of her world. This would imply that he has the potential to transform the world into a new Order in which Maisie at last receives a place propre. Certainly his attentive manner of addressing the little girl illustrated, for example, in his frequent use of phatic signals such as "my dear child," "don't you know," "of course," is likely to suggest to her that through his arrival she has acquired a new importance. Yet while she recognizes herself now as the catalyst of adult friendships causing otherwise unrelated parties to become allied by their mutual interest in her, the reader may well detect more significance – more "sexual play" – in Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale's conversation than Maisie is able to perceive.

Once he has delivered Maisie to her mother's home, Sir Claude shows his interest in her through occasional, but by no means regular visits to the schoolroom:

> He disappeared at times for days, when his patient friends understood that her ladyship would naturally absorb him; but he always came back with the drollest stories of where he had been, a wonderful picture of society, and even with pretty presents that showed how in absence he thought of his home (WMK p. 59).

If to the reader, such unpredictable behaviour may suggest far less responsibility than might be expected of a step-father and self-proclaimed "family-man" (WMK p. 52) to Maisie and Mrs. Wix it would seem to be Sir Claude's very

elusiveness, his evasion of routine and discipline that constitutes his mysterious charm and that defines him as belonging to a world "Other" than that of the mundane schoolroom. While they may be entranced by the "wonderful picture of society" which Sir Claude paints for them, the reader may bear in mind the glimpses he himself has had of the extravagant living, the transgressive and capricious sexual alliances and the repression of any inhibiting codes of responsibility which the "Otherness" of the Farange social set also involves.

Although initially the charm of Sir Claude seems to entrance Ida as much as it does Maisie and Mrs. Wix, the harmony of this relationship is short-lived:

> ... there befell at last a period — six months brought it round — when for days together he scarcely came near them. He was "off," and Ida was "off," and they were sometimes off together and sometimes apart; ... At one of these times Maisie found her [Mrs. Wix] opening it out that, though the difficulties were many, it was Mrs. Beale who had now become the chief. Then somehow it was brought fully to the child's knowledge that her stepmother had been making attempts to see her, that her mother had deeply resented it, that her stepfather had backed her stepmother up, that the latter had pretended to be acting as the representative of her father, and that her mother took the whole thing, in plain terms, very hard. The situation was, as Mrs. Wix declared, an extraordinary muddle to be sure (WMK p. 62).

Still unaware of the "sexual game" — the excess of meaning — in play behind these events, Maisie reads her stepmother's attempts to see her literally, and if Mrs. Wix suspects such significance, she is likely to repress it as contradictory to her view of Sir Claude, and certainly as un-

suitable for discussion with her charge. It is not surprising therefore that without knowledge of the motivating principle – the sexual desire – behind the adult "game", Maisie finds the moves of the game bewildering. To the reader, Ida's resentment of Mrs. Beale's intrusion and Sir Claude's support of that intrusion seem to indicate that Mrs. Beale is looking for an excuse to rendezvous with Sir Claude, and he in turn is not averse to encouraging his admirer.

In parenthesis, it may also be noted that in What Maisie Knew adultery within the Farange's social "set" is never attributed any greater importance than the exchange of partners in a game. Love affairs are fleeting and the lovers involved never seem inspired to any great passion. Again, Tony Tanner, referring to Denis de Rougemont's study of passionate love – Love in the Western World – offers the following useful comments:

> It is part of Rougemont's pessimistic view of modern times that, in his opinion, as there has been a decay in "institutional obstructions," so there has been a slackening of tension between passion and society. There is no longer any real conflict between them, and what results is a "mutual neutralization," and a loss of meaning on both sides. When a society ceases to care much about marriage, and all that is implied in that transaction, by the same token it will lose contact with the sense of intense passion.[21]

[21] Tanner, Adultery in the Novel, p. 89. Tanner refers to Denis de Rougemont, Love in the Western World (New York: Anchor Books, 1957) pp. 45, 36, 298, 290.

Maisie's Divided Self: Participation and Passivity

As Maisie's term with her mother continues, it becomes clear that Sir Claude, far from providing her with a place propre or clarifying the rules that govern the adult "game" which Maisie so often witnesses, appears only to have added to the ambiguity and confusion in the various players' moves. Maisie herself remains in the strangely divided position whereby her "public social self" is involuntarily caught up in the "game" while her "private real self" is a passive, but anxiously interested spectator. She feels the involuntary passivity of her "real" position particularly intensely when she witnesses Mrs. Wix's proposal to Sir Claude that he abandon Ida and find accommodation for the three of them, Maisie, Mrs. Wix and himself. Mrs. Wix apparently hopes that Sir Claude will "save" himself from "corruption" by making Maisie's future and education his personal concern:

> So the sharpened sense of spectatorship was the child's main support, the long habit, from the first, of seeing herself in discussion and finding in the fury of it — she had had a glimpse of the game of football — a sort of compensation for the doom of a peculiar passivity. It gave her often an odd air of being present at her history in as separate a manner as if she could only get at experience by flattening her nose against a pane of glass. Such she felt to be the application of her nose while she waited for the effect of Mrs. Wix's eloquence. Sir Claude, however, did n't keep her long in a position so ungraceful: he sat down and opened his arms to her as he had done the day he came for her at her father's, and while he held her there, looking at her kindly, but as if their companion had brought the blood a good deal to his face, he said:
>
> "Dear Mrs. Wix is magnificent, but she's rather too grand about it. I mean the situation is n't after all quite so desperate or quite so simple. But I give you

> my word before her, and I give it to her before you, that I'll never, never, forsake you. Do you hear that, old fellow, and do you take it in? I'll stick to you through everything" (WMK p. 85).

The description of Maisie's "peculiar passivity" in this passage as "the doom" which requires "compensation" implies that she is very eager to participate in the adult decisions which involve her fate. She would be very ready to transform her position from that of object — the ball or shuttlecock that is kicked or whacked — to that of active participant, the kicker or whacker. For the present however, she resigns herself to the conclusion that she has not yet acquired sufficient "knowledge" to be considered able to participate in the "game". Mysteriously, though, the two adults she watches seem to be "playing" from diametrically opposed positions. To Mrs. Wix on the one hand, it is apparently easy to distinguish "being good" from "being bad," "high" motives and "the highest good" (WMK pp. 83-84) from "harm" and the "fatal." To Sir Claude, on the other hand, the circumstances before him are far less easily evaluated, and his role as stepfather is awkwardly complicated. He would like — as his declaration of loyalty to Maisie suggests — to live up to the ideal of resolute, unflinching hero that Mrs. Wix holds up to him. He even goes as far as to erect for Maisie and Mrs. Wix the fixed, unambiguous monument of his paternal "word" as an absolute — the Phallic authority — on which they can rely. However, put to the test, his resolution and

his "Word" prove as mutable, as ephemeral, as surely centred on "absence" as any other absolute that Maisie has yet hoped to rely on. This is clearly illustrated in the following episode, which also describes Maisie's first chance to "play" rather than "be played".

Sir Claude takes Maisie on an excursion one morning, evading her questions as to where they are going. When they eventually stop at an unfamiliar house Sir Claude explains to Maisie that this is her father's new home and that they have come to call on Mrs. Beale. It takes little time for Maisie to guess the most likely meaning of his explanation:

> She stared, very white, and, with her hand on his arm, though they had stopped, kept him sitting in the cab. "To leave me, do you mean?"
> He could scarce bring it out. "It's not for me to say if you <u>can</u> stay. We must look into it."
> (<u>WMK</u> p. 93).

Maisie's appeal to Sir Claude, her paleness and her stare, suggest that she is frightened. Yet Sir Claude not only evades responding to her fear — a fear which he has been to some extent instrumental in provoking and which his embarrassment suggests that he has noticed — but he evades identifying his own position in their circumstances. Throughout their conversation, Sir Claude is careful to avoid taking any standpoint which might define him as responsible for Maisie's unhappiness. It is his very fear of responsibility which provokes him to draw her gradually into active participation in the game that up to now she has only been

able to watch: "Look here, if you say so we won't after all go in" and then, "I leave the thing, now that we're here, absolutely with you. You must settle it. We'll only go in if you say so. If you don't say so we'll turn right round and drive away" (WMK p. 94).

Maisie's response to this invitation to participate in deciding her own fate reflects the alertness to ambiguity which her education according to "opposed principles" has taught her. She subjects Sir Claude to a rigorous questioning which suggests her intuitive appreciation of possible variables on which her decision may depend:

> "But all the same," he continued, "I leave the thing, now that we're here, absolutely with you. You must settle it. We'll only go in if you say so. If you don't say so we'll turn right round and drive away."
> "So in that case Mrs. Beale won't take me?"
> "Well — not by any act of ours."
> "And I shall be able to go on with mamma?" Maisie asked.
> "Oh I don't say that!"
> She considered. "But I thought you said you had squared her?"
> Sir Claude poked his stick at the splashboard of the cab. "Not, my dear child, to the point she now requires."
> "Then if she turns me out and I don't come here —?"
> Sir Claude promptly took her up. "What do I offer you, you naturally enquire? My poor chick, that's just what I ask myself. I don't see it, I confess, quite as straight as Mrs. Wix."
> His companion gazed a moment at what Mrs. Wix saw. "You mean we can't make a little family?"
> "It's very base of me, no doubt, but I can't wholly chuck your mother."
> Maisie, at this, emitted a low but lengthened sigh, a slight sound of reluctant assent which would certainly have been amusing to an auditor. "Then there is n't anything else?"
> "I vow I don't quite see what there is." (WMK pp. 94-95).

Ironically then, what her questioning in fact reveals is

that there are no variables in her position for her "choice" is no choice at all. The Law, in constituting the terms of her parents' divorce, has ruled that she be returned to her father's home, and Sir Claude as her stepfather, is compelled to fulfil this requirement. Although he has sworn to "stick" to Maisie "through everything," he is not in a position to carry out this promise literally. Maisie, recognizing that she will have to give him up and return to her father and Mrs. Beale, nevertheless begs Sir Claude to support her at least by visiting her "often and often." Even this amount of responsibility seems oppressive to Sir Claude, perhaps because he can read in it the danger of exposing his clandestine relationship with Mrs. Beale, or alternatively, the danger of encountering Mrs. Beale more frequently than he would ideally choose. To avoid having to adopt a firm position of refusal, however, he reluctantly concedes to Maisie's request. Having secured Sir Claude's support, Maisie accepts her fate:

> "All right!" Maisie jumped out. Mrs. Beale was at home, but not in the drawing-room, and when the butler had gone for her the child suddenly broke out: "But when I'm here what will Mrs. Wix do?"
>
> "Ah you should have thought of that sooner!" said her companion with the first faint note of asperity she had ever heard him sound (WMK p. 95).

This apparently insignificant "slip" is, I would argue, particularly interesting for it suggests a new order of division in Maisie's "self". Earlier in this chapter I pointed out that, while there are often suggestions in

the text, of a division in Maisie's concept of herself – a division between her "public" and her "private" selves – there is no suggestion of division in her consciousness per se. She is presented as a subject fully present to herself and fully in control of the knowledge that she is gradually managing to acquire. The "slip" described in the passage above implies that in fact, she is not in full control of this knowledge. For all her efforts to interpret her circumstances accurately, the question of Mrs. Wix – which is undoubtedly of great importance to Maisie – has eluded her consideration. Her interpretation has already been made when this question reasserts itself as a variable that she has failed to consider. In the light of this variable, what had passed as the systematic and thorough reading of a responsible individual, threatens to be transformed into the self-centred reading of an ingrate.

Although at this stage of Maisie's quest after "full knowledge" it is possible for the narrator to gloss over this "slip" as a matter of childish forgetfulness, this "hair-line crack" is later to develop into a fascinating "gap" in the narrator's knowledge which will bring about the need for transference to the reader as sujet-supposé-savoir.

The Captain and Countess:
Adult-ery or Playing with the "Other"

During Maisie's term at her father's Regent's Park

home, the "game" of transgression played by her parents and step-parents reaches a climax in two parallel incidents. The first occurs when Sir Claude takes Maisie on an outing to Hyde Park where they unfortunately interrupt an illicit rendezvous between Ida and her current lover, "the Captain." The second incident takes place when Mrs. Beale and Maisie, hoping to meet Sir Claude at the great Exhibition, instead bump into Beale Farange and his current lover, "the Countess" or "the brown lady." While on the first occasion Maisie's stepfather believes her mother to be playing billiards in Brussels, on the second, her stepmother understands her father to be yachting at Cowes. On the first occasion, the "Forest of Arden" is transformed into a battlefield in which Ida and Sir Claude clash swords; on the second, the sideshow which Maisie is watching — "the Flowers of the Forest" — is supplanted by a brief and bitter skirmish between Beale Farange and Mrs. Beale, after which Maisie finds herself hustled from the Exhibition by her father and transported by cab to the elegant home of his mistress.

It is on this latter occasion that a significant change is introduced into the pattern of Maisie's life, for in brief, the purpose of Beale Farange's <u>tête-à-tête</u> with her proves to be that he wishes to be absolved of his duties as her father. Since he has not the courage to abandon his daughter overtly, he devises the plan of declaring that he is going to America and offering Maisie the chance of accompanying him. He hopes that when she discovers

that this will entail abandoning both Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale, she will reject her father's offer and thus "let him off with all the honours — with all the appearance of virtue and sacrifice on his side" (WMK p. 142). On this occasion, even the narrator appears to lose patience with Beale Farange. Breaking the narrative convention of "central consciousness" he interrupts Maisie's patient, uncritical perspective of her father, and — forestalling the operation of irony which might have enabled the reader to judge Beale Farange's behaviour himself — declares the man to be "stupid," "so stupid all through." Not only is he too imperceptive to appreciate his daughter's intelligence, but even on the point of deserting her, he is unable to read in her the signs of generosity and tolerance which might have eased the awkwardness of even his present shabby plan. Instead he invents the proposition of the American journey and the invitation to Maisie to accompany him. She responds as follows:

> Planted once more before him in the middle of the room she felt herself turning white. "I?" she gasped, yet feeling as soon as she had spoken that such a note of dismay was not altogether pretty. ... It helped her in a few seconds to appear more as he would like her that she saw, in the lovely light of the Countess's splendour, exactly, however she appeared, the right answer to make. "Dear papa, I'll go with you anywhere." (WMK p. 139).

In the ambiguity of this response, the reader may once again identify an interesting division in Maisie between the conscious self over whose responses she has control,

and the unconscious Self whose responses are irrational and unpredictable. Once again, this division is different from that which she had consciously identified between her "public self" and her "private self" (vide pp. 344 + 354). Here the discrepancy occurs between what she rationally and consciously feels to be the right answer for a daughter to make to her father under such circumstances, and the answer which emanates from her before her rational thought has exercised its control. Her pallor and her gasp are signs which convey Maisie's fear and dismay at her father's proposal, yet they are not signs in a discourse consciously authorized by the rational Maisie. In fact the rational Maisie identifies them as "not altogether pretty," and certainly not what her father would like to hear. What she sees to be "exactly ... the right answer to make" is an absolute expression of tenderness and loyalty from which all suggestion of fear and dismay have been edited: "Dear papa, I'll go with you anywhere." This editing process is not accounted for in the textual discourse of the "central consciousness." The fear and dismay of Maisie's initial response are not reasoned away, they simply disappear from her "right" and conscious answer. Here once again, a slight "crack" appears in the narrator's discourse, although it does not yet manifest itself as a large enough "gap" to warrant transference to the reader. Through this "crack" the reader may glimpse the narrator's unwitting suggestion of an unconscious in Maisie, which, having momen-

tarily manifested itself as an irruption of fear and dismay, is once again repressed as a childish mistake, and supplanted by the conscious discourse which identifies the duty required of the child, to the Father, by the Symbolic Order.

It is because the ambiguity in Maisie's response is not consciously controlled that Beale Farange appears inaccurate and unfair in identifying it as deliberate, conscious, deception. However, it is because he himself occupies the ambiguous position of transgressive Father that he does not wish to recognize his child's expression of loyalty. Instead he chooses to recognize the response of fear and dismay that has been repressed:

> "That's a way, my dear, of saying 'No, thank you!' You know you don't want to go the least little mite. You can't humbug me!" Beale Farange laid down. "I don't want to bully you — I never bullied you in my life; but I make you the offer, and it's to take or to leave. Your mother will never again have any more to do with you than if you were a kitchenmaid she had turned out for going wrong. Therefore of course I'm your natural protector and you've a right to get everything out of me you can ..." (WMK p. 141).

Interestingly, the very conscious deception which Beale Farange claims to identify in the ambiguity of Maisie's response, is evident in the obvious contradictions which his conscious discourse expresses. For example, the supposedly democratic "I don't want to bully you — I never bullied you in my life;" is immediately preceded by the tyrranical, "'You can't humbug me!' Beale Farange laid down."

What Beale Farange's misreading of his daughter's position reflects is the commonplace oversimplification of "the Other" as "the opposite" rather than "the different." In other words, he reads Maisie's affirmations of loyalty as "the opposite" of the "truth" which he thinks she hides – the "truth" that she actually wants to renounce her father. He cannot, or perhaps does not want to, see that this loyalty is a part of "the truth"; that she would like to be loyal and loving to her father, but ambiguously, her fear of him makes her wish to renounce him too. Assuming that she wishes to be rid of him, he guesses that the more absolute the riddance he can offer her, the more tempted she will be to abandon him. He is therefore confounded when she rejects the very finality that he imagined would be most attractive to her.

It is at this point of stalemate, when Maisie refuses to accept that she will "never, never, never!" see her father again, that the Countess herself returns. The situation which follows is embarrassing both for Maisie and for the Countess. It seems that the latter has had no previous knowledge that her paid escort, Beale Farange, has a daughter, and in her efforts to hide from Maisie the invidiousness of her own position as his Patroness, she resorts to ingratiating toadyism. Maisie, on the other hand, expecting the Countess to be beautiful and poised – as storybooks have led her to believe that Countesses always are, and as the elegant home of the Countess has

suggested that she will be – is repulsed by the "short fat wheedling whiskered person" (WMK p. 147) whom she meets instead. In spite of her disgust, Maisie does recognize an "Otherness" in the Countess, a pathos and vulnerability of one who would like to be accepted, but by her very definition inspires inevitable rejection:[22]

> The great pain of the thing was that she could see the Countess liked her enough to wish to be liked in return, and it was from the idea of a return she sought utterly to flee. It was the idea of a return that after a confusion of loud words had broken out between the others brought to her lips with the tremor preceding disaster: "Can't I, please, be sent home in a cab?" Yes, the Countess wanted her and the Countess was wounded and chilled, and she could n't help it, and it was all the more dreadful because it only made the Countess more coaxing and more impossible. The only thing that sustained either of them perhaps till the cab came ... was its being in the air somehow that Beale had done what he wanted (WMK p. 148).

[22] The Countess, being negroid and therefore subject to the kind of racial prejudice expressed by Mrs. Beale (the latter refers to black ladies as "always hideous" and their dress as "the vulgarest of the vulgar" (WMK pp. 131-132)), being far from conventionally goodlooking, a foreigner and a woman, appears to have only one attribute to save her from utter alienation in late-Victorian London: her financial resources. She is able to hire Beale Farange as an escort. It seems important to point out however, that if the Countess is condemned by the unambiguous judgements of Mrs. Beale and later of Mrs. Wix, these readings are not endorsed by the text. This seems to be the point which Maxwell Geismar misses when he offers the following comment on What Maisie Knew as an example of Henry James's later novels:

"To this later James also, it almost appeared that Jews, Negroes and Lovers were the worst culprits in his fin de siècle scene of bohemian decadence. ... The 'brown Countess' is described as 'a clever frizzled poodle in a frill, or a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat.' (Is it possible that she is an American Negro?) Earlier in the novel, also, we have been introduced to another of Ida's rich friends, Mr. Perriam, who has a bald head, a black mustache, eyes like 'polished little billiard globes,' and a large diamond of dazzling luster. 'He's quite my idea,' says Mrs. Wix, 'of a Heathen Jew.' But he will be immensely rich. 'On the death of his papa?' asks the bright little Maisie. 'Dear no – nothing hereditary,' answers the refined well-informed governess. 'I mean he has made a mass of money!" – Geismar, p. 154.

(continued →)

Since Beale Farange has been unable to inveigle the required renunciation from Maisie, he has simply put the appropriate words of disloyalty into her mouth, telling the Countess that "she declines to have anything to do with us." Thus, in spite of her attempts to be loyal to her father, Maisie finds herself with no choice but to relinquish him to the claims of the Countess.

In Search of a New Symbolic Order: the Launching of Mrs. Wix's Plan

On the fifth day following her meeting with the Countess and her father's abdication of his paternity, Maisie is unexpectedly swept up from the Farange residence at Regent's Park, and with Susan Ash in attendance, is transported by Sir Claude to Folkestone. As he discloses to Maisie, the force chiefly responsible for instigating this dramatic turn of events is Mrs. Wix. Evidently, the latter's plan that Sir Claude should establish a new home

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This would seem precisely the oversimplified interpretation of these alienated characters which James's text does not authorize. While the Countess, for example, is presented as the "Other" of the Symbolic Order, there is no authorial endorsement that the codes of this Order are "good" and the Countess therefore "bad". To assume that she is one of "the worst culprits" in a "scene of bohemian decadence" would surely be to follow the limited reading of the two governesses. As Maisie's response indicates, the Countess is ambiguously both repulsive in her toadyism, yet touchingly pathetic in her efforts to reduce the alienation she suffers in late-Victorian London. I suggest that it is such oversimplifications which lead Geismar to dismiss What Maisie Knew in the manner already referred to on page 334 of this chapter.

where Maisie, her elderly governess and her stepfather might live uncorrupt lives, dissociated from the transgressions of the Faranges and their London "set", has made steady progress during Maisie's sojourn at Regent's Park. Interestingly, however, while Maisie is a part of this plan, she does not appear to be its focus. Instead, this focal point appears to be Sir Claude: the necessity that he escape from his fellow transgressors and become reinstated on the side of "Symbolic Order." While Maisie does not consciously detect this preoccupation in Mrs. Wix's plan, it does occur to her as strange that Mrs. Wix, who has herself agreed that Maisie is "morally at home in atmospheres it would be appalling to analyse" (WMK p. 155), should now be so insistent on this move to a "foreign land." She wonders furthermore why Mrs. Wix has not appeared "at first hand" in her own plan, but she resolves to wait patiently for the disclosure of the answers to these mysteries.

On the eve of their flight from England to France, Sir Claude and Maisie, waiting in the hotel garden for the announcement of the evening meal, are disturbed on their peaceful garden bench by the unexpected appearance of her ladyship, Ida. It would seem that the purpose of her visit is to take her leave of Maisie and, like her former husband, Beale, absolve herself from her parental responsibilities while receiving, simultaneously, "all the honours." Although, like Beale, she claims to be on the brink of departure for a foreign country — South Africa

– and offers Maisie the opportunity of accompanying her, she does not press the offer and it becomes somehow lost in the "profuse and prolonged" but "not exhaustively lucid" (WMK p. 164) monologue she performs before Maisie. Amongst the "muddle of inconsequent things" she makes her claims: that she is "crazily ... criminally good," "awfully ill," "formed to suffer," "very, very tired," "very, very determined," and so forth.

Maisie in her eagerness to show sympathy and loyalty to her mother corroborates Ida's claims by remarking that "the Captain" (with whom she had had to wait in Hyde Park while Ida and Sir Claude did battle with each other) had also declared that her mother was remarkably "good". Unfortunately for Maisie it appears that "the Captain" has since fallen from Ida's favour. The little girl's naïve belief in "the Captain" as a loyal lover rather than one of many fleeting admirers, only incenses her mother who abandons her child with the final alliterative denouncement:

> "You're a dreadful dismal deplorable little thing," ... And with this she turned back and rustled away over the lawn (WMK p. 170).

Maisie, at least for the present, is rescued from the dusk of this parentless world by the figure of Sir Claude looking out for her from the lighted hotel doorway, the prospect of the table d'hôte and the promise of the journey to France the following day.

FRANCE AND THE UNVEILING OF THE PHALLUS

Knowledge as an Absent Presence

Initially, "being abroad" seems to promise Maisie the long awaited opportunity to attain "full knowledge". Not only does she escape the inhibiting effect of familiar rules and recognized prohibitions, but she confronts with delight a seemingly limitless abundance of fascinating and readily accessible difference:

> She was "abroad" and she gave herself up to it, responded to it, in the bright air, before the pink houses, among the bare-legged fishwives and the red-legged soldiers, with the instant certitude of a vocation. Her vocation was to see the world and to thrill with enjoyment of the picture; she had grown older in five minutes and had by the time they reached the hotel recognized in the institutions and manners of France a multitude of affinities and messages. ... On the spot, at Boulogne, though there might have been excess there was at least no wavering; she recognized, she understood, she adored and took possession; feeling herself attuned to everything and laying her hand, right and left, on what had simply been waiting for her
> (WMK pp. 173-174).

This apparent jouissance[23] is predictably short-lived.

[23] The reader of this thesis who is familiar with the use of this word both in the work of Lacan and perhaps more notoriously in the work of Roland Barthes, will appreciate my wish to use it without translation. For the uninitiated, the following explanation may be helpful.

Lacan, sustaining the recognition of the equivalence of sexuality to meaning already described in the Introduction of this chapter, uses jouissance which is literally translatable as the bliss of sexual orgasm, to refer to that state of "absolute bliss," "full subjectivity," "full presence," "full meaning" and so forth that man denies himself in the primal linguistic repression. It is a state only conceivable as "between the lines" of language:

> "... jouissance is forbidden to him who speaks as such, although it can only be said between the lines for whoever is subject of the Law, since the Law is grounded in this very prohibition"
> (Ecrits p. 319).

It is this location of jouissance as occurring "between the lines" that Barthes uses in establishing the opposition between his some-

In conversation with Sir Claude, Maisie learns that already prohibitions intrude on the freedom of foreign travel, one of the severest restrictions to be observed being the shortage of money. The second factor that governs their immediate decisions is the projected arrival of the guardian of Symbolic Law, Mrs. Wix. It is in response to Maisie's inquiry about how long they will stay in Boulogne that Sir Claude responds,

> "We shall stay till she arrives."
> She [Maisie] turned upon him. "Mrs. Beale?"
> "Mrs. Wix. I've had a wire," he went on. "She has seen your mother."
> "Seen mamma?" Maisie stared. "Where in the world?"
> "Apparently in London. They've been together."
> For an instant this looked ominous — a fear came into her eyes. "Then she has n't gone?"
> "Your mother? — to South Africa? I give it up, dear boy." Sir Claude said; and she seemed literally to see him give it up as he stood there and with a kind of absent gaze — absent, that is, from her affairs — followed the fine stride and shining limbs of a young fishwife who had just waded out of the sea with her basketful of shrimps.

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what esoteric concepts of the "text of pleasure" and the "text of bliss/jouissance" — see The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) p. 22.

In my use of this term, I wish to imply Maisie's experience of the "difference" or "Otherness" of France as an unrestricted and therefore blissful play of new meanings, which give the impression that the "full knowledge" after which she quests is now accessible to her. In the scene described, the reader may recognize that a fundamental component of this "accessible meaning" that up to now has been repressed, is "sexuality". In the phrases, "gave herself up to it," "thrill with enjoyment," "she adored and took possession," Maisie's response is identifiable as an enjoyment of that "sexual" play, that "play of difference" which up to now has been forbidden to her. For, as the image of the "bare-legged fishwives and the red-legged soldiers" suggests, "sexuality" or that meaning which has been repressed as the forbidden Other in the Symbolic Order of late-Victorian London, is clearly accessible as the norm in the Symbolic Order of France.

> His thought came back to her sooner than his eyes. "But I dare say it's all right. She would n't come if it was n't, poor old thing: she knows rather well what she's about."
>
> This was so reassuring that Maisie, after turning it over, could make it fit into her dream . "Well, what is she about?"
>
> He finally stopped looking at the fishwife — he met his companion's enquiry. "Oh you know!" There was something in the way he said it that made, between them, more of an equality than she had yet imagined; but it had also more the effect of raising her up than of letting her down, and what it did with her was shown by the sound of her assent.
>
> "Yes — I know!" What she knew, what she could know is by this time no secret to us: it grew and grew at any rate, the rest of that day, in the air of what he took for granted. It was better he should do that than attempt to test her knowledge; but there at the worst was the gist of the matter: it was open between them at last that their great change, as, speaking as if it had already lasted weeks, Maisie called it, was somehow built up round Mrs. Wix. Before she went to bed that night she knew further that Sir Claude, since, as he called it, they had been on the rush, had received more telegrams than one. But they separated again without speaking of Mrs. Beale
>
> (WMK pp. 176-177).

Earlier it was noted that Maisie, in the flurry of her departure from Folkestone, had wondered firstly, why Mrs. Wix had not at that point appeared in the execution of her own scheme, and secondly, why — if she had already conceded that Maisie seemed "morally at home in atmospheres it would be appalling to analyse" (WMK p. 155) — she should suddenly be so insistent that Sir Claude transport the child to "some foreign land." Now these questions appear about to be resolved: Mrs. Wix is due to participate actively in her plan, yet strangely, this participation does not seem to be authorized by Sir Claude, but rather by her ladyship in London. However, Sir Claude does seem

to accept Mrs. Wix's arrival as likely to be compatible with the rest of her scheme, "she knows rather well what she's about." This surmise gives Maisie the opportunity to resolve the second mystery, "Well, what is she about?" Ambiguously, Sir Claude meets this with, "Oh you know!"

On one hand, Sir Claude's reply might be interpreted literally as referring to the plan that he should set up a home for himself, Maisie and Mrs. Wix where the three friends could live in peace away from the squabbling and intrigues of the likes of Ida and Beale. However, even at the time of its proposal, there had been aspects of this plan which Maisie had been unable to understand. She had, for example, noticed but had been unable to comprehend why Sir Claude had been incredulous to hear Mrs. Wix describe his possible decampment with her as "beautiful" (vide WMK p. 84). She also noticed that Mrs. Wix "faintly smiled" and "faintly coloured" at Sir Claude's incredulity. She could not understand moreover who the "real bad" woman was from whose corrupting influence Mrs. Wix seemed to consider it necessary to "save" Sir Claude. On that occasion, Sir Claude was "not mystified" by Mrs. Wix's scheme; on the contrary, a "smile of intelligence broke afresh in his eyes" (WMK p. 84). If the reader too, can deduce that Mrs. Wix would judge decamping with Sir Claude as "beautiful" because she is "over head and ears" (WMK p. 61) about him; that the unnamed "bad" woman is Mrs. Beale; and that the "corruption" from which Mrs. Wix wishes to

save Sir Claude is an illicit affair with Mrs. Beale, Maisie cannot grasp these excess significances behind Mrs. Wix's plan.

This division between meaning that is accessible to Maisie and meaning that is repressed from her knowledge is manifested once again in the dynamics of her conversation with Sir Claude here at Boulogne. When, for example, she asks him if her mother has gone to South Africa, he replies that he "gives it up," that he can make no meaning of the subject they discuss, namely Ida. To the reader, it may be evident that if Sir Claude cannot explain Ida's behaviour to Maisie, it is because the information on which such an explanation depends is "forbidden". Even as he says "I give it up," it is evident to the reader that while his gaze is "absent ... from her affairs" he continues to play with the forbidden meaning which is withheld from Maisie and which continues to manifest itself in the "signs" of the "fine stride and shining limbs of a young fishwife." Significantly, the point at which Sir Claude removes his "absent gaze" from the fishwife – represses "play" with the Other – and turns back to Maisie and the conscious discussion of her affairs, is also the point at which he represses Maisie's enquiry as to the nature of the Other – "Well what is she about?" – with the utterance "Oh you know!"

With this response, "Oh you know!", Sir Claude evades the task of explaining Mrs. Wix's actions by treating Maisie

as one who, like him, is "in-the-know." Maisie, feeling that this reply makes "between them more of an equality than she had yet imagined," and moreover "has more the effect of raising her up than of letting him down," responds with the discretion that agrees implicitly not to pursue the request for an explanation of the unknown, but instead, to follow Sir Claude's cue of treating it as that which the discreet need not trouble to discuss. In other words, her response "Yes — I know!" is an agreement that Mrs. Wix's reasons for acting as she does belong to the locus of the "unmentionable."

Now, this response is followed by the narrator's "aside" to the reader:

> What she knew, what she could know is by this time no secret to us: it grew and grew at any rate, the rest of that day, in the air of what he took for granted.

Here, I would argue is the first clearly identifiable instance of unconscious transference from the text to the reader. While the narrator claims that Maisie's knowledge is known to us — "what she could know is by this time no secret to us" — he is actually following Sir Claude's strategy, inviting the reader to accept as "known" or "understood" that excess of Maisie's knowledge which is inaccessible or "forbidden" to narrative discourse. He transfers to the reader as sujet-supposé-savoir, unconsciously inviting him to produce that "meaning" which is beyond the recognition of the authorial consciousness. From the locus

of the Other, the reader may see that the division recognized by the authorial consciousness between knowledge which is accessible to Maisie and knowledge which is forbidden, is as applicable to our knowledge of Maisie's knowledge. There is that part of her knowledge which she can articulate as conscious discourse and which the narrator can claim to translate, and there is that part of her knowledge which is unconscious and which is Other than, or inaccessible to conscious discourse. It is this excess which <u>is</u> in fact a secret to us, and must remain so.

Having produced this apparently repressed information, the reader may transfer back to the narrator who resumes his discourse, informing us that Maisie's knowledge "grew and grew", so that by the end of this first day at Boulogne, she has established that the "great change" which she and Sir Claude have experienced, "... was somehow built round Mrs. Wix" and if this conclusion depends on "unspoken, absent knowledge" it would seem thereby to relate to the obviously absent, but apparently unmentionable, Mrs. Beale.

Mrs. Wix's Unconscious Desire

On her arrival at Boulogne, Mrs. Wix eagerly explains to Maisie and Sir Claude how she has at last managed to assume the role which she had originally conceived for herself in her own scheme: she has been appointed by Ida as the "clean" and "decent" moral guardian of Maisie. However, she herself seems to attribute more importance

to her additional role of "saving" Sir Claude from "the worst person of all" — Mrs. Beale. In the very energy of Mrs. Wix's repudiation of Mrs. Beale, the reader may interpret the unspoken "Otherness" of her motives: the repressed Desire which she herself harbours for Sir Claude. In spite of her efforts to uphold her identity as moral guardian by keeping her transgressive Desire firmly repressed, there are occasions on which this Desire irrupts unexpectedly into her discourse, disrupting the very moral order which its repression should define. A particularly comical, if somewhat bizarre example of such an irruption can be found in the following scene which takes place late in the evening, the day of Mrs. Wix's arrival at Boulogne.

Mrs. Wix and Maisie are together in their private salon shortly before retiring to bed. Sir Claude bursts in with a letter from Mrs. Beale in which she encloses a communication just received from her husband at Spa — notably not America — declaring to her his irrevocable desertion of her as his wife. Sir Claude and Mrs. Wix produce very different readings of this text. To the former the letter is cause for great rejoicing for it means that Mrs. Beale is, by the desertion of her husband, as free as Sir Claude is by the desertion of his wife. Since he has been free to leave England and live with his stepdaughter and her governess, so Mrs. Beale is free now to do the same. While Mrs. Wix agrees that Mrs. Beale is now free, as Sir Claude is, not to have to pretend to live

with her former spouse, she will not concede that Mrs. Beale is free to join Sir Claude at Boulogne for she recognizes the difference, the play of illicit sexuality, which underlies such a proposition. Sir Claude then challenges the logic of Mrs. Wix's interpretation:

> "Then why the deuce do you grant so — do you, I may even say, rejoice so — that by the desertion of my own precious partner I'm free?"
>
> Mrs. Wix met this challenge first with silence, then with a demonstration the most extraordinary, the most unexpected. Maisie could scarcely believe her eyes as she saw the good lady, with whom she had associated no faintest shade of any art of provocation, actually, after an upward grimace, give Sir Claude a great giggling insinuating naughty slap. "You wretch — you know why!" And she turned away. The face that with this movement she left him to present to Maisie was to abide with his stepdaughter as the very image of stupefaction; (WMK p. 191).

In challenging Mrs. Wix's interpretation of his own freedom and the freedom of Mrs. Beale, Sir Claude represses the sexuality which defines Mrs. Beale's position as different from his own. He implies that Mrs. Wix should be as delighted by the freedom of one step-parent (Mrs. Beale) to live with stepdaughter and governess as she is by the freedom of the other/Other step-parent (Sir Claude). Mrs. Wix reprimands him verbally and consciously for refusing to recognize what he consciously "knows" to be wrong or in other words for refusing to recognize sexual difference in his relationship with Mrs. Beale. Simultaneously, she unconsciously reprimands him for his repressed, unconscious knowledge. The signs of her body language — the "upward grimace," the "great giggling insinuating naughty slap,"

– disturb the sense of her solemn verbal reprimand, "playfully" rebuking Sir Claude for having failed to recognize the sexual difference in his relationship to her. While Maisie is confused by the "non-sense" produced by this irruption of "excess meaning," Sir Claude is faced with the confounding possibility that he is the object of Mrs. Wix's Desire, just as much as he is the object of Mrs. Beale's. The elderly governess is only free to live with him because in conformity to Symbolic Law she agrees to repress her Desire, to play the role of Symbolic Parent to Sir Claude as well as to Maisie and thereby to identify herself as "clean" in a way that the "unclean" Mrs. Beale will surely refuse to do. Yet, as was the case earlier in Mrs. Beale's relationship as "Miss Overmore" to Beale Farange, Mrs. Wix's role as "governess/mentor" only serves to exclude the "Otherness" of her role as "governess/lover" and correspondingly, Maisie's role as "child/pupil" only serves to exclude the "Otherness" of her role as "child/pretext".

It is this conflict between the role which Mrs. Wix is permitted to play and that which she is forbidden to play that can be seen to repeat itself in the critical conflict waged between Marius Bewley and F.R. Leavis in the Scrutiny articles of 1950.[24] I should like to digress

[24] Martha Banta offers the following useful summary of this debate:

"The Scrutiny debate began when Bewley insisted upon the presence of the 'metaphysically appalling' in The Turn of the Screw and of 'horror' in What Maisie Knew, and developed when

here, if only briefly, to demonstrate how each of these critics, in offering his interpretation of the text can be seen to participate in, or dramatize the conflict contained within the text.

In Bewley's first article, he described Mrs. Wix's affection for Sir Claude as follows:

> Elderly, ugly, fantastic as she is, Mrs. Wix falls in love with Sir Claude. The fact isn't insisted on, and it might even be possible to interpret in non-erotic terms her passionate avowal to Maisie that she 'adores' Sir Claude, although I doubt it. The revealing glimpse we are given into the real situation — so shocking to our nerves just because it is so sudden and only a glimpse — occurs in Chapter XXIV. Although the allusions are veiled, Mrs. Wix's behaviour and speeches are such as to be understandable only in terms of an utter infatuation for the young man, and there are moments when our belief in her disinterestedness wears thin. Her desire to keep Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale separated, if it arises primarily from her concern for Maisie, seems at some points not to be untouched by sexual jealousy. And the ugly possibility arises in the reader's mind that Mrs. Wix's attachment to Maisie may match Mrs. Beale's in this: that for them both, and however much they may like Maisie for herself, the little girl provides a means of closing in on Sir Claude.[25]

In this description, the conflict in the conscious discourse of What Maisie Knew, the conflict between permissible mean-

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Leavis denied the presence of such traditional elements of tragedy. The crux of the disagreement lies in Leavis' particular definition of evil (as that which finds its center in the sexual), his refusal to find evil in Maisie's world, and his resulting labeling of the novel as a comedy. Bewley also pronounced James's novel a comedy; he also agreed that sexuality is not the central preoccupation; but he found 'horror' and 'evil' just the same." — "The Quality of Experience in What Maisie Knew," New England Quarterly, 42 (Dec. 1969) p. 484.

[25] Marius Bewley, The Complex Fate, p. 100. Bewley's book contains the articles originally published in Scrutiny, XVII, 2 (Summer 1950) pp. 90-127 and Scrutiny XVII, 3 (Autumn, 1950) pp. 255-263.

ing such as Mrs. Wix's role as "mentor of the child" and forbidden meaning, such as Mrs. Wix's Desire to be "lover of the (step)father," is repeated in Bewley's discourse. On one hand, he would appear to want to repress his knowledge of the sexuality in Mrs. Wix's role, seeing her only as "mentor of the child." He argues, for example, that such sexuality "isn't insisted on," that "it might even be possible to interpret in non-erotic terms her passionate avowal ..." On the other hand however, he describes his identification of sexuality as the product of a "revealing glimpse ... into the real situation"(my emphasis) implying that evidence of Mrs. Wix's Desire to be "lover to the father" is indeed accessible in the discourse of the text.

In his next statement that "allusions are veiled" he participates again in the text's conflict: "sexuality" or excess meaning is included in the text as "allusion", an inclusion which is paradoxically excluded behind a veil. The double negative: "Her desire to keep Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale separated ... seems at some points not to be untouched by sexual jealousy" (my emphasis) manifests again Bewley's involvement in the conflict: are we to deny, or must we admit this excess of meaning, the "sexuality" which in its absence is so obviously present?

F.R. Leavis, arguing against Bewley, repressing more strongly the "play" of "sexuality", nevertheless also participates in the conflict which the text dramatizes: the conflict between meaning which is to be recognized and

meaning which is to be repressed. Leavis replies to Bewley's observations about Mrs. Wix with the following argument:

> ... Sir Claude is an attractive man, and 'erotic' in these days is a term of extensive and uncertain application. But it is surely a very odd term to apply to poor Mrs. Wix's state, and the context given it by Mr. Bewley adds to the emphasis with which it must be rejected.
>
> ... Sir Claude, in short is the beau idéal of her romantic daydreams, and her feeling about him is as much, and as little, 'erotic' as Maisie's, if more positively a matter of comedy – since, after all, a childish 'adoration' in her is less in place than in a child. I concede to Mr. Bewley, without embarrassment, that perhaps Maisie as well as Mrs. Wix is jealous of Mrs. Beale.
>
> An element of jealousy may contribute to Maisie's decision to go back to England with Mrs. Wix. But I have to insist that sex, in this story, is only marginal to James's preoccupation; he shows, here no moral feeling at all that is directed upon sex as such.[26]

For the moment, I shall suspend the question of Maisie's feeling towards Sir Claude which will be discussed in detail in due course. The points of Leavis's argument upon which I wish to focus are, firstly his contention that "erotic" is "a very odd term to apply to poor Mrs. Wix's state," (my emphasis), and secondly that Mrs. Wix's "adoration" of Sir Claude is "a matter of comedy." It is surely because Desire of a young man (represented in the Oedipal myth by the figure of the son) by an old woman (the mother) is "Other" than "the norm" permitted by the Symbolic Order – or in Leavis's terms, is "odd" – that "poor" Mrs. Wix's

[26] F.R. Leavis, "What Maisie Knew: A Disagreement by F.R. Leavis," in Marius Bewley, The Complex Fate, pp. 128-129.

Desire must be, and for the most part is, repressed. When therefore, this forbidden Desire is detectable, when it escapes repression and erupts as obvious meaning, it is, just as Leavis describes it, "comical", for it is a manifestation of that "non-sense" which threatens to subvert Symbolic "sense" that can only be sustained by the exclusion of such "play".

Leavis again replays a pattern dramatized in the text when he argues that "sex, in this story, is only marginal to James's preoccupation" for in the very repression of "sex" as "marginal" he unwittingly defines it as that excess or excluded meaning which gives definition to that "non-sexual" meaning included in the text as "central."

Suspending conclusions about these conflicting interpretations until the "Conclusion" of this interpretation, let us proceed with the present reading.

The Absence of Maisie's Moral Sense

Observing both Mrs. Wix and Sir Claude closely during the discussions of her stepmother, Maisie is able to deduce that Mrs. Wix objects vehemently to Mrs. Beale's joining the party at Boulogne, but she cannot fathom the reasons for that objection. It is to this issue therefore that she returns when she and Mrs. Wix bide their time at Boulogne, awaiting the outcome of Sir Claude's return to London:

> "Why after all should we have to choose between you? Why should n't we be four?" she finally demanded. Mrs. Wix gave the jerk of a sleeper awakened or

> the start even of one who hears a bullet whiz at the flag of truce. Her stupefaction at such a breach of the peace delayed for a moment her answer. "Four improprieties, do you mean? Because two of us happen to be decent people! Do I gather you to wish that I should stay on with you even if that woman is capable —?"
>
> Maisie took her up before she could further phrase Mrs. Beale's capability. "Stay on as my companion — yes. Stay on as just what you were at mamma's. Mrs. Beale would let you!" the child said.
>
> Mrs. Wix had by this time fairly sprung to her arms. "And who, I'd like to know, would let Mrs. Beale? Do you mean, little unfortunate, that you would?"
>
> "Why not, if now she's free?" (WMK pp. 201-202).

It is evident from Maisie's use of pronouns in her opening question — "Why after all should we have to choose between you?" (my emphasis) — that she identifies herself in this situation as the partner of Sir Claude and that in her view it is he and she who are being forced to choose between Mrs. Wix and Mrs. Beale. In order to avoid the exclusion of one of the latter which such a choice implies, Maisie is prepared to relinquish her position as Sir Claude's partner in order to create both a place for Mrs. Beale and also a place for Mrs. Wix, "Stay on as my companion — yes." Notably Maisie at this point appears to feel no regret at relinquishing Sir Claude to her stepmother, but sees this as a means to achieving a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Mrs. Wix however, refuses to recognize Mrs. Beale's authority as Symbolic Mother — the position to which she herself aspires. Since Maisie is unable to understand the transgressiveness which Mrs. Beale's role as Sir Claude's partner involves, she cannot follow Mrs. Wix's objections:

> "Well," said Mrs. Wix, "nobody, you know, is free to commit a crime."
>
> "A crime!" The word had come out in a way that made the child sound it again.
>
> "You'd commit as great a one as their own — and so should I — if we were to condone their immorality by our presence."
>
> Maisie waited a little; this seemed so fiercely conclusive. "Why is it immorality?" she nevertheless presently enquired.
>
> Her companion now turned upon her with a reproach softer because it was somehow deeper. "You're too unspeakable! Do you know what we're talking about?"
>
> In the interest of ultimate calm Maisie felt that she must be above all clear. "Certainly; about their taking advantage of their freedom."
>
> "Well, to do what?"
>
> "Why, to live with us."
>
> Mrs. Wix's laugh, at this, was literally wild. "'Us?' Thank you!"
>
> "Then to live with me."
>
> The words made her friend jump. "You give me up? You break with me for ever? You turn me into the street?"
>
> Maisie, though gasping a little, bore up under the rain of challenges. "Those, it seems to me, are the things you do to me." (WMK pp. 202-203).

Maisie's "obtuseness," her inability to recognize what is clearly "crime" and "immorality" to Mrs. Wix, provokes the latter to investigate the nature of her pupil's knowledge.[27] It would seem that with the question, "Well,

[27] Tanner's remarks on the concept of adultery as a "crime" against "unspoken" "silent" laws are interesting here:

"It is perhaps worth noting in passing that up to the end of the eighteenth century, adultery was an offense that could be, and still was, prosecuted in the court of law. In the nineteenth century, though the law remained in the books, it was, I gather, never publicly prosecuted in a court of law — i.e., it moves to the unspoken realm of those silent secondary laws of society, where the rules and the punishments are applied and meted out privately. This is another reason why adultery is one of the central problems for the bourgeois novel — unlike, for example, murder, which is arguably a greater threat to person, property, and law, but was never unspeakable in society and thus never undescribable in fiction." — Adultery in the Novel, p. 14.

I would argue that it is this problem of how to describe "the undescribable" that Henry James's text dramatizes — a conflict

to do what?" she is on the verge of exposing the issue of sexuality that has been up to this point the repressed source of Maisie's confusion. However, Maisie's answer to the question unconsciously excludes sexuality once again as knowledge already accepted. Instead of answering, as Mrs. Wix and even the reader, might have expected, "Why, to live with each other," thereby consciously naming the source of the argument as "adultery", Maisie answers "Why, to live with us" thereby excluding the issue of adultery as the accepted premise, and naming the issue under debate as "the cohabitation of adulterers and the 'decent'". The "wild laugh" which erupts from Mrs. Wix expresses her surprise at the unexpectedness of this response. If literally her disgruntled "'Us?' Thank you!" can be read as the moral guardian's reproof to her pupil for including her in the implicit acceptance of adultery, it can also be read as the indignance of the would-be lover who is required to recognize as acceptable in another, the transgressive behaviour which she has been required to repress in herself. Yet when Maisie appears resigned to the possibility that she cannot expect to have her governess if she accepts her step-parents together, Mrs. Wix realizes the price she will have to pay for her unflinching moral stand. Unless she can compromise and accept the implicit transgressiveness, the "play" in the step-parents' relationship,

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which is passed on as a "reading effect" to all its interpreters who in turn attempt to resolve the tension between overt and covert, or articulated and repressed, "meaning" in the text.

she cannot hope to find a place in the new "Symbolic Order" at Boulogne.

Ultimately, the conclusion to which these arguments bring Mrs. Wix is that Maisie, in spite of the extraordinary range of her knowledge, lacks a "moral sense." To the reader the absence which Mrs. Wix identifies in Maisie's knowledge, could also be described as the presence of the ability to recognize the "place of the Other." As we have already witnessed, Maisie, having been educated according to "opposed principles" in a social set where transgression of the Law is the norm, has never been presented with a clear description of the codes of a Symbolic Order. Consequently, she has also never acquired a clear sense of that which is forbidden by the Symbolic Law. Instead, what she has learned to accept is not that one opinion or perspective is right and permissible and another wrong and forbidden, but rather that such perspectives are as incompatible as the parents from whom they are initially learned, and can only be treated as incorrigibly different from each other. She therefore comes to accept that no matter how clearly she appears to understand an issue, that understanding viewed from a new position, is liable to change. This characteristic of Maisie as an interpreter or reader, manifests itself as the treatment of literal meaning as that behind which excess significance invariably lies, excess significance which she accepts as likely to become as clear to her in the future as she assumes it to be to an adult interpreter. It is because she appears to understand that

innuendos are at play beneath literal statements such as "to live together," or to be "in and out of the upper rooms" (WMK p. 75), that her adult companions come to believe that there is "nothing" which Maisie does not know. In fact it is precisely because she recognizes the locus of the "Other" — by which is implicit not merely the place of literal sexual meaning, but that "play" of repressed difference by which alternative meaning is producible — that Maisie has such an incongruously mature affinity for understanding new relations. Her knowledge is not restricted or "straightened" as is Mrs. Wix's, by her education to Symbolic Law which compels her to make moral judgements, even if in its plurality such knowledge frequently threatens to dissipate into meaningless ignorance.

The Otherness of Mrs. Beale

As she and Mrs. Wix continue to wait at Boulogne, without news of Sir Claude, Maisie's feelings towards Mrs. Beale undergo a gradual change. When Mrs. Wix had earlier denounced Mrs. Beale as "bad", Maisie had refused to accept this opinion with the retort, "She's beautiful and I love her, I love her and she's beautiful" (WMK p. 205). At that point, Mrs. Beale appeared still to be the object of Maisie's "first passion" (WMK p. 25). Now it begins to dawn on her that Mrs. Beale is to be regarded less as an object of adoration than as an object of suspicion. Because Sir Claude has admitted his fear of Mrs. Beale

(WMK p. 90), Maisie is aware that the latter has the power to bully him, and perhaps even to prevent him from writing or returning to his friends at Boulogne. On Mrs. Wix's provocation, she even recognizes that "jealousy" is something that she has felt towards Mrs. Beale "lots of times." The change in her feeling toward Mrs. Beale is perhaps most evident in the following exchange:

> "If I thought she was unkind to him — I don't know what I should do!"
> Mrs. Wix dropped one of her squints; she even confirmed it by a wild grunt. "I know what I should!"
> Maisie at this felt that she lagged. "Well, I can think of one thing."
> Mrs. Wix more directly challenged her. "What is it then?"
> Maisie met her expression as if it were a game with forfeits for winking. "I'd kill her!" That at least, she hoped as she looked away, would guarantee her moral sense (WMK pp. 213-214).

In judging "unkindness to Sir Claude" as a crime worthy of death, Maisie thereby identifies him as the Supreme Being of her world, her Perfect Friend. Mrs. Beale on the other hand is identified as one of the many devotees of this Supreme Being who must suffer extermination if she violates his sacredness. Maisie's declaration of Sir Claude's supremacy moves Mrs. Wix to tears:

> She [Maisie] looked away, but her companion said nothing for so long that she at last turned her head again. Then she saw the straighteners all blurred with tears which after a little seemed to have sprung from her own eyes. There were tears in fact on both sides of the spectacles, and they were even so thick that it was presently all Maisie could do to make out through them that slowly, finally Mrs. Wix put forth a hand. It was the material pressure that settled this and even at the end of some minutes more things besides. It settled in its own way one thing in particular, which,

> though often, between them, heaven knew, hovered round and hung over, was yet to be established without the shadow of an attenuating smile. Oh there was no gleam of levity, as little of humour as of deprecation, in the long time they now sat together or in the way in which at some unmeasured point of it Mrs. Wix became distinct enough for her own dignity and yet not loud enough for the snoozing old women.
>
> "I adore him. I adore him."
>
> Maisie took it well in; so well that in a moment more she would have answered profoundly: "So do I." But before that moment passed something took place that brought other words to her lips; nothing more, very possibly, than the closer consciousness in her hand of the significance of Mrs. Wix's. Their hands remained linked in unutterable sign of their union, and what Maisie at last said was simply and serenely: "Oh I know!"
>
> Their hands were so linked and their union was so confirmed that it took the far deep note of a bell, borne to them on the summer air, to call them back to a sense of hours and proprieties. They had touched bottom and melted together, but they gave a start at last: the bell was the voice of the inn and the inn was the image of luncheon (WMK p. 214).

In this description, the narrator's transfer to the reader as sujet-supposé-savoir is once again identifiable. In their weeping and holding of hands, Maisie and Mrs. Wix share their mutual feeling for Sir Claude, establishing their common identity as his devotees. However, a change can be detected in Maisie's expression of her feeling — a change which the reader is presumed to be able to understand without conscious explanation from the narrator. This change causes Maisie to alter the expression of her affection for Sir Claude from an overt declaration, "So do I [adore him]." to the discreet synoptic statement of assent "Oh I know!" which earlier (vide p. 383) signalled her recognition of that knowledge which defies conscious discourse and must be left unspoken. The moment at which

this change occurs is described as follows: "... something took place that brought other words to her lips; nothing more, very possibly, than the closer consciousness in her hand of the significance of Mrs. Wix's." The indefinite noun "something" signals the transference to the reader: what exactly took place escapes the narrator's verbal discourse, but the reader may from his position in the locus of the Other, articulate this "absent" significance, the only clue to which is the image of the linked hands: "the unutterable sign of their union" (my emphasis). Once again the reader is drawn into the conflict, his task being to produce that meaning which is Other than, or beyond, the conscious command of the narrator.

I suggest then that the "something" which takes place, for which the narrator can only offer a tentative, a "possible" explanation, amounts to Maisie's recognition in the unconscious, that the nature of her affection for Sir Claude is "forbidden". In other words, Maisie's affection for Sir Claude, like that of Mrs. Wix — the similarity of whose subjective position is suggested in the image of linked hands — must become an unspoken secret. It is no longer a spontaneous nursery affection for a best friend to be shared in comical declarations of being "over head and ears" in love, or "never so far gone" (WMK p. 61). It can only be shared "without the shadow of an attenuating smile ... no gleam of levity, as little of humour as of deprecation." It assumes a place in the realm of the sac-

red and taboo, for just as Mrs. Wix, in the Symbolic place of Mother must repress the possibility that Sir Claude, in the Symbolic place of her son, is the object of her Desire, so Maisie, in the Symbolic place of daughter must repress the possibility that Sir Claude, her Symbolic (step)-Father is the object of her Desire. In repressing their Desire for the forbidden, Maisie and Mrs. Wix seem to cling to each other for support in their loss. In "touching bottom and melting together" they seem to sink in their united banishment as Sir Claude's lovers, to the "Other-world" of irreducible, repressed difference. At length this "Other-world" is superseded by the "far deep note" of the luncheon bell, the Symbolic Sign which beckons them back to the world of the Symbolic Order, a less sacred, less solemn world that offers "the image of luncheon." This is also the sign to the reader to "counter-transfer" back to the conscious discourse of the narrator, the subject who knows what happens next: that Mrs. Beale, newly arrived from London, awaits them at their hotel.

* * * * *

Mrs. Beale wastes no time in offering her interpretation of the roles which she, Mrs. Wix and Maisie are to play from now on at Boulogne. The authority of her command, "Dear lady, please attend to my daughter" (WMK p. 219), establishes her as Mother and employer, Mrs. Wix

as employee and mentor of the pupil, and Maisie as daughter and pupil. Only Sir Claude remains to be allocated a place in the group, and faced with his continuing absence, Maisie begins to fear that she may have become the dupe of an inadequate exchange. Observing Mrs. Beale closely over luncheon, she reads in that lady's behaviour the suggestion of ulterior, implicit ("sexual") meaning:

> There was a phrase familiar to Maisie, so often was it used by this lady to express the idea of one's getting what one wanted: one got it — Mrs. Beale always said she at all events always got it or proposed to get it — by "making love." She was at present making love, singular as it appeared, to Mrs. Wix, and her young friend's mind had never moved in such freedom as on thus finding itself face to face with the question of what she wanted to get (WMK p. 222).

What it is that Mrs. Beale wants, Maisie deduces from comments such as, "Well, if she [Maisie] can live with but one of us alone, with which in the world should it be but me?" (WMK p. 223). She believes that Mrs. Beale's intention is to act as a replacement for Sir Claude, to establish herself in Mrs. Wix's eyes as stepmother and therefore as an acceptable alternative to Sir Claude as stepfather.

Since Mrs. Beale, by keeping Mrs. Wix and Maisie constantly with her, prevents them from conferring in private on her behaviour, Maisie is compelled to wait until "bedtime" before she can discover from Mrs. Wix whether she has detected and responded to the implications of Mrs. Beale's charm. It seems from Mrs. Wix's halting, mystified responses to Maisie's urgent enquiries, that she has not

up to this point recognized in Mrs. Beale's behaviour any ulterior, excess meaning that might be identified by Maisie's comical but appropriately suggestive term "making love." Reading Mrs. Beale's charm literally, Mrs. Wix understands her to want her, Mrs. Wix, to accept Mrs. Beale as Maisie's mother. Although Mrs. Wix would have preferred to have worked for Maisie's stepfather alone, she appears to have recognized the value of a compromise in which at least she and Maisie will be able to remain together. To Maisie, the suggestion of such a compromise is appalling, for as already discussed, she no longer considers Mrs. Beale as at all worthy of the kind of adoration which is due to Sir Claude. Doggedly, she presses Mrs. Wix for a conclusion:

> "You don't answer my question," Maisie persisted. "I want to know if you accept her."
> Mrs. Wix continued to hedge. "I want to know if you do!"
> Everything in the child's person, at this, announced that it was easy to know. "Not for a moment."
> "Not the two now?" Mrs. Wix had caught on; she flushed with it. "Only him alone?"
> "Him alone or nobody."
> "Not even me?" cried Mrs. Wix.
> Maisie looked at her a moment, then began to undress. "Oh you're nobody!" (WMK pp. 228-229).

What is perfectly clear in Maisie's mind is that she is no longer prepared either to share Sir Claude, or to accept an alternative to him. If earlier she had envisaged a foursome in which differences between "decency" and "indecency", "lovers" and "little girls" were not considered important, now she recognizes such differences as vital. If Mrs.

Beale and Sir Claude are supposedly "step-parents", they are not, to Maisie, "the same". Mrs. Beale, as a woman, cannot replace Sir Claude in Maisie's world/text, although she certainly can replace Maisie in Sir Claude's. In other words, because in Maisie's world Mrs. Beale represents too much sameness (to Maisie) and too much difference (to Sir Claude) she must be repressed or excluded. Maisie can accept "Him alone or nobody."[28]

Alarmed by Maisie's new stand, Mrs. Wix tries to establish her own position in the new Order. With Maisie's enigmatic identification of the old woman, "Oh you're nobody!" the chapter closes leaving the reader to interpret the significance of this remark. What it seems to imply is that for Maisie Sir Claude is the Supreme Being, the symbolic "phallus" whom she envisages as having the potential to transform her life into a state of "perfection". He can be neither duplicated, nor replaced. Mrs. Wix on the other hand, is the Symbolic Mother; she is of the Order of the Law and of Desire repressed. Unlike Mrs. Beale, who is the "Other," she is the representative, the substitute, the "nobody" who inadequately attempts to fill

[28] What Maisie does not suspect is that Mrs. Wix has already agreed to compromise her "cleanness" and has told Mrs. Beale that she is prepared to stay on in a foursome when Sir Claude arrives. This arrangement is hinted at in Mrs. Wix's question, "Not the two now? ... Only him alone?" but it is only disclosed to Maisie (and the reader) the following day (later in the text), after she has made her own conclusive decision (see WMK pp. 258-259). I shall return to this decision of Mrs. Wix's shortly.

the gap of the only "somebody", and with whose company Maisie would be content if she was, like Mrs. Wix, compelled to repress her Desire for "the phallus," Sir Claude.

The Return of Sir Claude:
having/losing the Phallus/phallus

The morning after the conversation described above, Mrs. Wix announces to Maisie that Sir Claude has just arrived once more at Boulogne and although Maisie tries to respond to the news with her usual unambiguous delight, she is vaguely aware that "what had happened was oddly ... less of a simple rapture than any arrival or return of the same supreme friend had ever been before" (WMK p. 230). Encountering Sir Claude in person, and agreeing to breakfast alone with him at a quay-side café where they may enjoy each other's company undisturbed, Maisie becomes increasingly conscious of an excess significance, playing beneath the surface of Sir Claude's attempts to be "normal". She senses a disparity between the meaning that he tries to convey — that they are, as they had been on similar occasions in London, two happily reunited comrades or cronies — and the contradictions — the fear and nervousness which intrude into that meaning in spite of his efforts to conceal them. This disparity frightens Maisie for it suggests to her a duplicity in Sir Claude which she had suspected earlier at the hotel when he claimed not to have seen Mrs. Beale since his arrival that morning at Boulogne.

While she is also conscious that Sir Claude is afraid, she has difficulty in deducing what the cause of his fear could be.

At last Sir Claude explains to Maisie that he has returned to Boulogne for the particular purpose of asking her something:

> "What is it you meant you came over to ask me?"
> "Well," said Sir Claude, "I was just going to say. Let me tell you it will surprise you." She had finished breakfast now and she sat back in her chair again: she waited in silence to hear. He had pushed the things before him a little way and had his elbows on the table. This time, she was convinced, she knew what was coming, and once more, for the crash, as with Mrs. Wix lately in her room, she held her breath and drew together her eyelids. He was going to say she must give him up. He looked hard at her again; then he made his effort. "Should you see your way to let her go?"
> She was bewildered. "To let who —?"
> "Mrs. Wix simply. I put it at the worst. Should you see your way to sacrifice her? Of course I know what I'm asking."
> Maisie's eyes opened wide again; this was so different from what she had expected. "And stay with you alone?"
> He gave another push to his coffee-cup. "With me and Mrs. Beale. Of course it would be rather rum; but everything in our whole story is rather rum, you know. What's more unusual than for any one to be given up, like you, by her parents?" (WMK p. 246).

If Maisie expected Sir Claude to request that she give him up, she is confused by the difference, the unforeseen "Otherness" of his proposal. To the reader this difference will be easier to comprehend. In effect what Sir Claude proposes is that Maisie relinquish the old "Symbolic Order" of morality and literal meaning into which Mrs. Wix had been attempting so energetically to initiate her,

and accept in its place a new "Symbolic Order" in which the actions condemned by the old Order as "sexual" transgressions are recognized as "the norm." Yet in this new Order Maisie is offered a place which is different both to the place she had held in the old Order as Sir Claude's friend and equal — "an awfully good 'chap'" (WMK p. 63), and "also a man of the world," (WMK p. 65) — and to the place she had conceived for herself in the new Order as his complement, in perfect equilibrium with "Him alone ..." (WMK p. 229). In the new Order he now offers, Sir Claude will be neither her friendly companion, nor the Supreme Being (the "phallus"), but will adopt his place propre as her Symbolic Father while Maisie must assume the new role of "daughter." She will thus be required to repress her Desire for Sir Claude and recognize instead the Desire of Mrs. Beale who in spite of being unmarried to Sir Claude — for neither has yet been legally freed from former marriage by divorce — will nevertheless assume the role of his partner and of Symbolic Mother, representative of the Law, to Maisie. Faced with so unexpected and confusing a choice, she can only plead for time in which to weigh her decision.

It is eventually at the station, where they go to buy the Paris papers, that the conflict of Maisie's choice reaches a climax. The Paris train which has just arrived in Boulogne, is waiting in the station for its return trip. Suddenly the dream of escape alone with Sir Claude to the

"Other-world" of this foreign city, which had seemed so nearly fulfilled on her first arrival at Boulogne, appears once again accessible to Maisie. Tentatively, she makes her wish known to Sir Claude:

> "I wish we could go. Won't you take me?"
> He continued to smile. "Would you really come?"
> "Oh yes, oh yes. Try."
> "Do you want me to take our tickets?"
> "Yes, take them."
> "Without any luggage?"
> She showed their two armfuls [armfuls of daily papers just bought], smiling at him as he smiled at her, but so conscious of being more frightened than she had ever been in her life that she seemed to see her whiteness as in a glass. Then she knew that what she saw was Sir Claude's whiteness: he was as frightened as herself. "Have n't we got plenty of luggage?" she asked. "Take the tickets — have n't you time? When does the train go?"
> Sir Claude turned to a porter. "When does the train go?"
> The man looked up at the station-clock. "In two minutes. Monsieur est placé?"
> "Pas encore."
> "Et vos billets? — vous n'avez que le temps." Then after a look at Maisie, "Monsieur veut-il que je les prenne?" the man said.
> Sir Claude turned back to her. "Veux-tu bien qu'il en prenne?"
> It was the most extraordinary thing in the world: in the intensity of her excitement she not only by illumination understood all their French, but fell into it with an active perfection. She addressed herself straight to the porter. "Prenny, prenny. Oh prenny!"
> "Ah si mademoiselle le veut —!" He waited there for the money.
> But Sir Claude only stared — stared at her with his white face. "You have chosen then? You'll let her go?"
> Maisie carried her eyes wistfully to the train, where, amid cries of "En voiture, en voiture!" heads were at windows and doors banging loud. The porter was pressing "Ah vous n'avez plus le temps!"
> "It's going — it's going!" cried Maisie.
> They watched it move, they watched it start; then the man went his way with a shrug. "It's gone!" Sir Claude said.
> Maisie crept some distance up the platform; she stood there with her back to her companion, following

> it with her eyes, keeping down tears, nursing her pink and yellow books. She had had a real fright but had fallen back to earth. The odd thing was that in her fall her fear too had been dashed down and broken. It was gone. She looked round at last, from where she had paused, at Sir Claude's, and then saw that his was n't. It sat there with him on the bench to which, against the wall of the station, he had retreated, and where, leaning back and, as she thought, rather queer, he still waited. She came down to him and he continued to offer his ineffectual intention of pleasantry. "Yes, I've chosen," she said to him. "I'll let her go if you — if you — "
>
> She faltered; he quickly took her up. "If I, if I —?"
>
> "If you'll give up Mrs. Beale."
>
> "Oh!" he exclaimed; on which she saw how much, how hopelessly he was afraid. She had supposed at the café that it was of his rebellion, of his gathering motive; but how could that be when his temptations — that temptation for example of the train they had just lost — were after all so slight? Mrs. Wix was right. He was afraid of his weakness — of his weakness (WMK pp. 254-255).

Maisie's response to this unexpected opportunity is described by the narrator as a conflict between her enthusiasm at the idea of escaping to Paris with Sir Claude, and her fear of such an escape. As she expresses her eagerness to Sir Claude, her growing excitement overpowers her fear; considerations such as her luggage and time become unimportant, while any thoughts of the two governesses, the embodiments of Symbolic Law waiting at the hotel, are quite excluded from the dialogue. Then, at a moment that the narrator can only describe as Other than the norm, "the most extraordinary thing in the world," and the product of a mysterious insight, an "illumination," Maisie is able not only to understand, but to participate in the French, the discourse of the Other spoken by Sir Claude and the porter. Again in his apparent inability to account ratio-

nally for Maisie's sudden "understanding", the narrator unconsciously transfers to the reader who may recognize in Maisie's aberrant discourse a subject who speaks neither in English nor in French or perhaps both in English and in French. For the "Prenny, prenny. Oh prenny!" is neither English, "Take, take. Oh take!" nor French, "Prenez, prenez. Oh prenez!" In the play of its meaning this utterance suggests neither a subject who asks simply for tickets, nor one who asks simply for sexual fulfilment (vide the remarks of Harris W. Wilson quoted on p. 333 of this chapter), but a play of repressed subjective positions which articulate the meaningless play of linguistic difference that has been repressed by the subject which identifies itself in meaningful conscious discourse. Transferring back to the narrator, the story continues.

If Maisie is momentarily transported by her unconscious Desire to subvert Symbolic Order and attain "perfect knowledge" by the "sexual" fulfilment, the attainment of the forbidden "phallus", Sir Claude in his fear clings to the conventions of Symbolic Order whereby the train traveller is expected to be in possession of luggage, a reservation, a ticket and so forth. He thus manages to evade either meeting or repressing Maisie's Desire, for as he stalls, the train, with the offer of "Other-worldliness" slips away, and Maisie feels her impulse of rebellion, her unconscious Desire, to be "dashed down and broken." However, in the repression of the rebellion, or the falling "back

to earth" her dream of escaping with her hero, of attaining the object of Desire, becomes translated into a carefully ordered rational solution to the proposal made to her by Sir Claude: she will give up Mrs. Wix if Sir Claude will give up Mrs. Beale. If she is to repress her Desire for the "phallus" she must receive in its place the Phallus, the power of signification which requires for the signifying subject a clear identity, a <u>place propre</u> in a Symbolic Order. If Maisie is to give up Mrs. Wix who up to now has acted as the representative of Symbolic Order, then she must receive in the place of the old governess a responsible Symbolic parent. If Sir Claude is to prove himself worthy of such Authority he too must repress his transgressive Desire and reciprocally give up the company of Mrs. Beale.

As she presents him with her response to his proposal, Maisie realizes that Sir Claude's fear which has not, like hers, been "broken down" by the departure of the tempting train, is not relieved, but intensified by her proposition. His fear is not the same as hers. While she was fearful of the consequences of indulging her own gathering motive to rebel or transgress authority in the pursuit of her Ideal, Sir Claude is fearful of the consequences of taking a firm subjective position, of repressing the "Otherness" of Womanhood embodied in Mrs. Beale, and accepting the responsibility of parental authority within the Symbolic Order. Thus while Maisie declares herself prepared to

give up Mrs. Wix in order to achieve a lawful relation with Sir Claude, he, "the poor sunk slave ... to his passions" (WMK p. 231), has yet to find the courage to reciprocate. As Maisie waits for him to make his decision, they gradually make their way back to the hotel.

Symbolic Order, Meaning and the Other: What Maisie Comes to Know

At the hotel, Maisie and Sir Claude discover that in their absence, Mrs. Beale and Mrs. Wix have had a violent quarrel, and that Mrs. Wix is on the point of departing on the ferry for Folkestone. The basis of their argument appears to be that Mrs. Wix, having agreed the previous day to remain with the foursome as Maisie's governess, has now decided to leave because Maisie and Sir Claude have "been out too long." She has declared herself "disgusted" with Maisie for "having no moral sense." Nevertheless, having promised earlier that she would never voluntarily abandon Maisie (WMK p. 205), she wants to find out before she leaves, whether the little girl accepts this world of immorality or whether she has retained sufficient "moral sense" to be still accessible to Mrs. Wix's moral tutelage:

> ... Mrs. Wix raised a hand that forestalled every evasion. "Don't move till you've heard me. I'm going, but I must first understand. Have you lost it again?"
>
> Maisie surveyed — for the idea of a describable loss — the immensity of space. Then she replied lamely enough: "I feel as if I had lost everything."
>
> Mrs. Wix looked dark. "Do you mean to say you have lost what we found together with so much diffi-

> culty two days ago?" As her pupil failed of response she continued: "Do you mean to say you've already forgotten what we found together?"
>
> Maisie dimly remembered. "My moral sense?"
>
> "Your moral sense. Have n't I, after all, brought it out?" She spoke as she had never spoken even in the schoolroom and with the book in her hand.
>
> It brought back to the child's recollection how she sometimes could n't repeat on Friday the sentence that had been glib on Wednesday, and she dealt all feebly and ruefully with the present tough passage. Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale stood there like visitors at an "exam." She had indeed an instant a whiff of the faint flower that Mrs. Wix pretended to have plucked and now with such a peremptory hand thrust at her nose. Then it left her, and, as if she were sinking with a slip from a foothold, her arms made a short jerk. What this jerk represented was the spasm within her of something still deeper than a moral sense. She looked at her examiner; she looked at the visitors; she felt the rising of the tears she had kept down at the station. They had nothing — no, distinctly nothing — to do with moral sense. The only thing was the old flat shameful schoolroom plea. "I don't know — I don't know."
>
> (WMK p. 260-261).

If earlier, Maisie had appeared to Mrs. Wix to be acquiring the beginnings of a "moral sense" it was because Sir Claude had come to stand as an "absolute" against which she could measure "right" from "wrong". She had been able, for example, to judge irreverence to Sir Claude as a crime worthy of capital punishment (vide p. 397). Through her experience at the station, however, she has discovered that her view of Sir Claude's perfection is an illusion. She has come to recognize that he neither reciprocates her Desire for him, nor has the courage to accept responsibility. Thus Maisie's loss of her Ideal (the "phallus"), and acceptance of compromise (the Phallus), is followed by the recognition of perfection as irrecoverably lost: "I feel as if I had lost everything." If she has had the "whiff of

the faint flower" of morality in her earlier attempts to distinguish "right" from "wrong", now even this is lost. As the narrator describes her actions, he once again transfers to the reader: "as if she were sinking with a slip from a foothold, her arms made a short jerk. What this jerk represented was the spasm within her of something still deeper than a moral sense." This enigmatic "something" seems describable as the unspoken and unspeakable Other of Maisie's conscious knowledge, authorized by her unconscious Self. This Other, associated with her tears of loss on the station, defies the simple clarity of "moral sense" and produces in Maisie the sense of indeterminacy which she expresses in her desperate repetition, "I don't know — I don't know."

To return once again to the narrator's discourse, if Maisie is unable to respond positively to Mrs. Wix's investigation of her moral sense, she is also unable to confirm Mrs. Beale's prompt assumption that she accepts the place of "daughter" to Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale. At the point when she is being besieged by the authoritative demands of the two governesses who compete for the position of Symbolic Mother, Sir Claude — the "slave" of the "Other" — at last assumes a firm responsible stand in defence of Maisie's freedom. Reassuring her with the words, "You're free — you're free," (WMK p. 262), he enables her to resume the interpretive position which she had earlier decided was "right."

The validity of the choice which Maisie makes from this position and the "exquisiteness" of the condition that her choice entails, lies in the implicit acknowledgement of the need to respect Symbolic Law in order to establish "meaning." Not only does she herself assume a firm subjective position as one who knows what she wants, but she insists that Sir Claude too assume the responsibility of stating what he wants. Thus, while Maisie recognizes the locus of "Otherness", her choice reflects an unconscious awareness of the need to repress the Desire to "play" with such "Otherness" if any "knowledge" or "meaning" is to acquire a degree of determinacy.

However while Sir Claude is unable to meet Maisie's demands to state whether he wishes to be Father to her, or Lover to Mrs. Beale, the latter is in her turn "scandalised to tears" at Maisie's suggestion that she give up Sir Claude. Her tearful outrage provokes Sir Claude to one of his gallant, gentlemanly declarations: "... my dear, I have n't given you up ... and if you'd like me to treat our friends here as solemn witnesses I don't mind giving you my word for it that I never never will." (WMK p. 267). This is, of course, not the first time that Sir Claude has offered his "Phallic Word" as an absolute, and it will no doubt not be long before it displays its inevitable wilting "Otherness". If he was able to be responsible long enough to defend Maisie's freedom, he now resumes "play" with Mrs. Beale in the meaningless capricious "game"

of transgression. Little remains now, but for Maisie to take her leave.

> On the threshold Maisie paused; she put out her hand to her stepfather. He took it and held it a moment, and their eyes met as the eyes of those who have done for each other what they can. "Good-bye," he repeated.
>
> "Good-bye." And Maisie followed Mrs. Wix.
>
> They caught the steamer, which was just putting off, and hustled across the gulf, found thenselves on the deck so breathless and so scared that they gave up half the voyage to letting their emotion sink. It sank slowly and imperfectly; but at last, in mid-channel, surrounded by the quiet sea, Mrs. Wix had courage to revert. "I did n't look back, did you?"
>
> "Yes. He was n't there." said Maisie.
>
> "Not on the balcony?"
>
> Maisie waited a moment; then "He was n't there" she simply said again.
>
> Mrs. Wix also was silent a while. "He went to her," she finally observed.
>
> "Oh I know!" the child replied.
>
> Mrs Wix. gave a sidelong look. She still had room for wonder at what Maisie knew (WMK pp. 267-268).

As their hand-shake suggests, Maisie and Sir Claude part on a note of businesslike resignation. Each has assisted the other in attaining the freedom to choose, and each returns to the world of that choice. Sir Claude returns to his world of empty "play"; Maisie returns to the laws of Symbolic Order, the "safety" of Mrs. Wix and the irreducible quest for more knowledge, more meaning. If the reader fears that Maisie may suffer oppression under the moral laws of Mrs. Wix[29] this fear may be alleviated first-

[29] Tony Tanner for example, identifies Mrs. Wix as the "embodiment par excellence" of Henry James's "conscious conscience — the very home of the literal, the haunt of so many pedantries."* Tanner goes on to argue, "... we are to infer that Maisie's character will 'suffer much' by close association with it [Mrs. Wix's 'conscious conscience'] by enforced subjugation to it." — Tanner, The Reign of Wonder p. 219. *Henry James, Autobiographies, quoted by Tanner, p. 291.

ly, by the thought of Mrs. Wix's earlier compromise of her "absolute" morality (vide p. 403), and secondly, by the implications of her closing dialogue with Maisie. While Mrs. Wix, governed by the "straightness" of her vision, has not had the courage to look back to see if Sir Claude is watching their departure, Maisie has looked back. Her questing instinct — her hope or unconscious Desire that her Ideal (the "phallus") embodied by Sir Claude, might still be hers and manifesting itself as such in some small gesture such as a wave of the hand — is far from extinguished. Nevertheless, it is balanced by a resignation to the rational awareness that Sir Claude belongs to another — to the world of the "Other" — and he returns to "her". The inevitable presence of the "Other" perspective, Maisie quietly accepts in the little phrase which "deranges" the straightness of Mrs. Wix's moral vision. The old governess can only "look sidelong" at the little girl's apparent appreciation of an infinity of unspoken meaning implicit in her simple phrase: "Oh I know."

* * * * *

IN CONCLUSION

At the start of this chapter I described the quest of my reading as threefold: in brief, my chief concern was to be the attempt to unveil the text's "unconscious knowledge," and my secondary concerns, to explore the iden-

tity between sexuality and linguistic meaning in What Maisie Knew and to explore prior readings of the text as performances or repetitions of the textual conflict. What conclusions does this quest lead us to?

First of all, in the reading I have offered, it seems clearly evident that the view adopted by the authorial consciousness towards concepts such as "knowledge," "meaning," and "truth" is a view which anticipates widely-held current opinion that such concepts are ambiguous rather than absolute, ephemeral rather than constant, and arbitrary rather than inherent. The possibility of transcending the ambiguity of the world and achieving either "full knowledge" or "full meaning" or "full truth" is portrayed in What Maisie Knew as the vain hope of an innocent which is doomed to frustration. The implication at the close of the novel is that Maisie as the quester after knowledge can never hope to "arrive", but can only ever continue to "proceed".

The nature of human consciousness which such an authorial view would seem to suggest, is one that is incomplete and constantly seeks to redefine itself. It is this kind of consciousness which John Carlos Rowe identifies when he describes the "self" portrayed in James's The Portrait of a Lady as,

> a constant process of drawing and redrawing that incomplete circle whereby the aesthetic consciousness expresses its shifting locus.[30]

Rowe goes on to argue that Henry James,

> ... prefigures his brother's formulation of consciousness as a function and relation rather than a substance ... The Jamesian novel is fundamentally one of relation, the character's self defined as he sees himself and as others see him.[31]

While this view of the Jamesian consciousness seems to me a valid one, the point I wish to make is this: while indeed James's view of the "self" as presented in What Maisie Knew seems to be defined by the way Maisie as central consciousness sees herself (the "private self") and the way in which others see her, (the "public self"), what this view does not apparently recognize is the "self's" definition by that which is not seen by the central consciousness, which is inaccessible both to her and to others, namely, the "self's" Other or unconscious.

In the course of this reading, I have identified four instances of transference, each of which seems to arise from the narrator's inability to account for particular choices which Maisie makes. It is notable that these narratorial uncertainties only arise in the latter portion of the text, as Maisie gradually comes to assume responsibility for her choices and the narrator is required to "translate" both choices and their sources in his narrative

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[30] John Carlos Rowe, Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergence of a Modern Consciousness (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976) p. 34.

[31] Rowe, pp. 34-35.

discourse. In other words, the focus of the text on issues relating to subjectivity, intensifies.

In the first instance of transference, the narrator requires the reader to establish for himself that portion of Maisie's knowledge which is beyond the narrator's power to describe (vide p. 383); in the second instance he unconsciously requires the reader to establish the source of Maisie's recognition that her feeling for Sir Claude is "forbidden" (vide pp. 398-400); in the third instance he unconsciously requires the reader to name the source of Maisie's aberrant plea "Prenny, prenny. Oh prenny!" (vide p. 409); and finally in the fourth instance he requires the reader to establish the source of Maisie's sense of indeterminacy (vide p. 413).

The conflict which seems to arise in each of these transferences is a conflict between the knowledge which is present to the narrator, and the knowledge which is absent. While he appears to recognize a division in knowledge itself, a division between the accessible and the forbidden that would imply an equivalent split in subjectivity between the accessible conscious self and the forbidden unconscious self, his discourse reflects at these points of transference, the failure to pursue such an implication to its final conclusion. I would argue then that just as "sexuality" is to Maisie's consciousness the excess or excluded "marginal" meaning which gives definition to her "non-sexual", innocent but "central" knowledge, so

the issue of the unconscious or split-subjectivity is, to the authorial consciousness that "marginal" or excess meaning which gives definition to the Jamesian view of the "self".

From this conclusion it becomes apparent that the conflict between accessible "non-sexual" knowledge, and forbidden "sexual" knowledge which is dramatized in the conscious discourse of the text, is re-enacted beyond the textual boundaries between the knowledge that is accessible to the narrator and the knowledge that is beyond him. It is the latter knowledge which the reader in the locus of the Other, is compelled to produce. Yet, in the very act of producing the unconscious knowledge of the text, the reader finds himself caught up in a repetition of the problem dramatized by the conscious discourse of the text: the experience of the Desire to know and articulate that meaning which has been repressed, yet the simultaneous discovery that such articulation itself can only be given meaning as a result of an act of repression. And if we return again to the Scrutiny debate of Marius Bewley and F.R. Leavis, or (as another lesser known example) the difference of opinion between Carren Kaston and Harris Wilson (vide p. 335) it is clear that the problem dramatized by the text — having reproduced itself in each of these critics as an "effect to produce" or Desire to make meaning and resolve conflict — repeats itself once again at a further remove in the arguments arising from the readings of these readings.

Seen in this light, this chapter itself then, is no more than a "return" to, and participation in, the conflict dramatized by Henry James — an effort to resolve the conflict in the terms of this reader's Desire.

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EPILOGUE

> The cultural division ... of scholarly "disciplines" of research is by no means a natural geography: there are no natural boundaries between literature and psychoanalysis, which clearly define and distinguish them; the border between them is undecidable since they are really traversed by each other.
>
> — Shoshana Felman

In the Introduction to this thesis, and in the chapters that follow, I have repeatedly drawn attention to the divided nature of my quest as both an investigation of the reading activity (a commentary-upon-the-quest) and simultaneously, a participation in the very activity to be investigated (a performance-of-the-quest). For the duration of this epilogue however, I ask my reader to suspend the awareness of this division which I have up to now tried to cultivate; for to draw conclusions I must claim to adopt an "authoritative" position outside the reading activity and ask, "What 'truth' has the quest of this thesis unveiled?"

The conclusion which I would perhaps name as "central" to this investigation – and I place the epithet "central" in inverted commas to emphasize its arbitrariness, its vulnerability to decentring by an Other reading – is that a revised view of the role of the reader is called for and with it a revised view of the reading activity and of the truth at which narrative interpretation arrives. In the light of Lacanian insights, the reader can no longer be viewed as an autonomous subject, fully in control of the interpretation he produces and having the potential to decode the "full meaning" of the text he reads. He can no longer be seen as a witness standing outside the text and asking, "<u>What</u> does the text mean?" "<u>What</u> is its 'truth' or message?" Instead, he must be seen as a divided or split subject who even in the action of commenting on

the text, of attempting to control the text's meaning, finds himself caught up in the textual conflict and performing or re-enacting the very division in meaning that he sought to resolve.

The reader's role then, being one of participation in the text, is not so much to discover what the truth might be but to decentre that "truth" in order to discover at what price it stands. In the process of assuming this role, his position as reader or narratee, although distinguishable from that of the text's writer or narrator, is inseparable from it. The two roles should be seen as interacting with and informing each other, while differing from or pulling against each other — a model of the reader which answers to Lacan's view of subjectivity as split between the subject of the signifier (or utterance) and the subject of the signified (or statement), which interact not as two distinct "gravitational centres" but as two "gravitational counter-forces."

This thesis then, does not call simply for a change of focus from the view of reading as a quest after the truth, to a view which recognizes that there can be no truth. Instead, it calls for a deconstruction of "truth" per se, asking "What does 'the truth' disregard or fail to account for in order to be 'the truth'?" According to this "new way of reading," it is possible to arrive at some kind of "truth," but the status of that truth retains an element of undecidability which renders it irre-

ducibly open to revision. Because the Other as the unknowable remains beyond the reach of knowledge, "the truth" must be defined as that solution which by consensus is seen to account for the most aspects of a particular mystery. In fact we must conclude that the attainment of "full truth" must be relinquished as an impossible ideal since, immanent to the "complete revelation" which "full truth" implies, is the transgression of all boundaries or laws and therefore the destruction of any "truth" or "meaning" which such laws bring into being.

If then, this thesis concludes that the view of the author as "the master," and the reader as "the eager quester after the master's knowledge," is to be abandoned, if it views author and reader, narrator and narratee as counterforces, between whom the relationship is coordinate rather than in any way subordinate, it implicitly echoes the call for a revision in the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis which has been one of the most fascinating effects of Lacan's "return to Freud."

In her prefatory article to the Yale French Studies special issue on "Literature and Psychoanalysis" Shoshana Felman justifies the suspicion which literary critics frequently express towards so-called "psychoanalytic" readings of literary texts. Only too often such readings imply,

> ... a relation in which literature is submitted to the authority, to the prestige of psychoanalysis. While literature is considered as a body of language – to be interpreted – psychoanalysis is considered as a body of knowledge, whose competence is called upon

> to interpret. Psychoanalysis, in other words, occupies the place of a subject, literature that of an object; the relation of interpretation is structured as a relation of master to slave; ... literature's function, like that of the slave, is to serve precisely the desire of psychoanalytical theory – its desire for recognition; exercising its authority and power over the literary field, holding a discourse of masterly competence, psychoanalysis, in literature, thus seems to seek above all its own satisfaction.[1]

What Felman and other literary theorists and critics have tried to introduce is a dialogue between literature and psychoanalysis, in which each informs the other. I hope that this thesis, if only by its implications, has contributed to this redressing of the balance between the two fields, so that psychoanalysis may be viewed not as an authoritative science against which literary critics and theorists need to defend themselves and literature, but as "the Other" which differs from, but participates in, literature; and similarly, literature is no longer seen as the slave to the Desire of psychoanalysis, but is recognized and respected in its turn as the locus of repressed difference, the unknown Other of psychoanalysis.

If, with these "conclusions" I give my reader to understand that we have "arrived" at "the truth", let me sound once again the reminder that this "truth" must stand at the cost of some repression of Otherness beyond the range of my discourse to identify. Although at this point, then, I arrest my reading quest, it can only be to abdicate my

[1] Shoshana Felman, "To Open the Question," Yale French Studies, 55/56 (1977) pp. 5-6.

place as an interpreter of the ambiguities in the role of the reader to "an-Other" quester, who may rewrite my text in the terms of his own Desire.

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